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IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED?:
EXPECTATIONS, CHOICE, AND RHETORICAL AGENCY IN COMPOSITION

by
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A DISSERTATION

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IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED?:
EXPECTATIONS, CHOICE, AND RHETORICAL AGENCY IN COMPOSITION

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University of Nebraska, 2019

Advisor: Shari Stenberg

Choices are a given in rhetorical education, but composition has not given enough attention to the relationship between choices and students' experiences of rhetorical agency. This dissertation uses expectations as an entry point and choices as a unit of analysis to explore how students navigate and understand their decision-making processes during a single composition project. Drawing from activity theory, this study analyzes classroom data including drafts, author's notes, and peer response materials as well as student interview data and writing center consultation transcripts. This dynamic approach allows for an exploration of the messiness of the process, creating a portrait of three students and their projects in turn as they complete a composition project that asks students to craft a public text, with an audience beyond the classroom. Each student's story demonstrates the challenges of crafting a shared understanding of the rhetorical situation, though each also suggests where that composition teachers might readjust their expectations or leverage the opportunities. The results suggest that while instructional materials—such as the syllabus and the assignment sheet—are important to shaping students' processes, these artifacts are only one part of the ecology of an assignment. Further, helping students become more reflexive about their choices may help address any unexamined beliefs about authority in education and public rhetoric and the potential of leveraging multifaceted and intersecting student identities.

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to Cathy Leibman,
and to Mark Leibman

I love you,
Daughter

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CHAPTER 1

“IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED?”

It used to be one of the worst teaching moments for me. Each semester, my English 101 students made it to the end of the final project for the course. They created impactful and personally meaningful projects that reached out to audiences across campus, into the community, or even across the Twitterverse. They engaged in meaningful peer response with each other and with undergraduate peer consultants in the Writing Center. And then, in the final moments of the project, they came to me, near-final drafts in hand, to ask *the question*.

“So is this what you wanted?”

It made me sigh the biggest of teacher sighs. In this one question, I felt instantly that I’d let them down. This question meant that somehow, I had not designed the truly powerful, student-centered assignment I thought I had. Their powerful, public work was still too much about me, still more about its value as an assignment than as rhetorical action—for my taste, at least.

I’ve always believed my students are free: free to choose topics that interest them, free to set and pursue their own rhetorical goals, free to fit my class into the bigger scheme of their education and of their lives. With choices to make, students have the opportunity to practice agency, I thought. In this final project, I ask students to choose their own rhetorical purpose and audience, and both must be “real”: the purpose must help advocate for or support a cause of the student’s choosing and be shared with an audience outside the class. I intended the personal connection to encourage engagement with the project and a sense of ownership, that the project was theirs or, at least, for them.

Questions like “Is this what you were looking for?” or “Is this right?” signaled to me that I could not escape the dominance of grades and school learning. The most empowering project I had to offer was still, at the end of the day, just another assignment.

From engaging in this study, I have learned that I was wrong. Or, at least, I’ve learned that the problem was not with the realities of school but with my view of things. My disappointment in “the question” reinforced a dualistic perspective, a view that makes public writing and school writing feel mutually exclusive. Perhaps it was the way I structured the assignment that lulled me into thinking that students’ work in this project would exist in a magically extracurricular space. This third and final class project, the Advocacy Project, asks students to create a “Public Text”: a text that I describe as having “a rhetorical purpose of creating positive, productive change for a cause in the world, with an audience that reaches beyond your instructor and classmates.” Here I can see that even the language of my assignment sheet may have contributed to my operating theory that this project must inherently be less “about me” and “what I want” than other projects, because of the audience outside the classroom and students’ freedom and burden to choose their topic and rhetorical purpose.

As a composition teacher who grounds her pedagogy in rhetorical awareness, I should’ve known this wasn’t the showdown it seemed to be. In fact, a rhetorical approach should have primed me to recognize the way assignments function on multiple levels: even texts aimed at public audiences (actual or imagined) still satisfy a social, transactional function as they earn grades or credit. I knew that composition scholars had been shifting from process pedagogy through the rise of critical pedagogy—and that composition and rhetorical pedagogies coexist—but then where was my gut reaction

coming from? And how should I move beyond a dualistic framework that limits my understanding of what student writing “does” and “where”?

A review of the literature reveals that composition and rhetoric scholars have been grappling with similar questions across the last few decades. In his 1997 “Rethinking Genre,” David R. Russell argues that even personally meaningful projects with public audiences are still bound by the activity system from which they originated: school. Many scholars have noted that students and teachers alike “rightly perceive” the genre of an assignment as operating more “immediately and directly” in the university-wide genre system than in any discipline-based systems—let alone any public or professional sphere (Russell 539). Thus, “school” is almost always perceived as the primary activity happening in a composition classroom; some would argue the fundamental rhetorical purpose of any assignment is a grade, and any other purposes are secondary.

I’m far from a cynic, but this discussion helps me remain grounded. In my own exploration of agency, how students enact their studenthood and behave in response to assignments is key: it is a central line of inquiry in this dissertation. The expectations of a teacher articulate the imagined activities, methods, or products of an assignment. If rhetorical choices are situationally-bound, then, teachers must acknowledge the ways that their expectations shape a student’s decision-making process. Expectations may be implicit, explicit, or perceived, but this feature complicates the idea of a student’s rhetorical agency: expectations, I would say, communicate the range and texture of available choices in a given situation. They also develop parameters, sometimes naming or implying choices that are inappropriate, unacceptable, or otherwise uncalled for. Yet, I notice many faculty across the disciplines assume that students who fail to successfully

navigate those expectations must either possess deficiencies or be lazy. Such assumptions simply don't square with my experiences with "the question." I've learned that the utterance "Is this what you wanted?" should also not be taken as a sign I've failed to empower my students.

And yet, "the question" is still telling of... something. This question, once a trigger for feelings of frustration or hopelessness, is now a site of curiosity. I can see that the moments leading to this question are rich with conflict and confusion but also experimentation, communication, and a desire for understanding. It's a given: my motives and students' motives will be at times fundamentally, theoretically different. Now, students' questions about what I "want" serve as a thoughtful reminder that all assignments operate within school genres; their questions ring like a bell to call my attention back to the complex and beautiful work I get to do. How can I better leverage an academic assignment that encourages public rhetorical work? It's not an extracurricular question, either: Roth and Lee explain that learning only "occurs during *the expansion of the subject's action possibilities* in the pursuit of meaningful objects in activity" (Roth and Lee 198, emphasis added).

These are the reflections that led me to the present study. To investigate how students' rhetorical agency functions in my composition class, I used the idea of what a teacher "wants" as my point of entry; that is, I posed my research question in terms of students' decision-making processes given the implicit, explicit, and perceived expectations at play. I asked, *What is the relationship between expectations and rhetorical agency?* Choice, then, serves as the behavioral unit that allows me to better examine experiences of agency in a particular situation. With IRB (Institutional Review

Board) approval from both Doane University and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, the study was conducted in spring 2018 in one section of English 101, a course that I’ve taught more than a dozen times and one that I’ve always seen as a potential site of agency for students.

For context, in all three composition projects I assign in this class, my expectations often try to work “within and against” norms. The projects I assign draw attention to the ways that our school setting is part of their composition process but not a limit for it. The projects reflect that students are whole people—students, writers, and citizens—and offer room for many identities and many forms and purposes for composing. Each of the three major projects “works within traditional academic conventions” but also asks the students to rely “on the self as a vital source of information” (Stenberg *Repurposing* 33). The first project is the Writer Portrait: it asks students to select, analyze, and compose an essay about three previous texts they’ve written, for both school and non-school rhetorical purposes. The second project is the Campus Investigation, offering students a chance to develop both research and narrative skills as they pose and follow questions about a topic related to our shared space of campus. In this project, students often seek to understand where an activity or organization “came from” in our school’s history or how a concept has changed over time. I ask students to braid primary and secondary research with their own personal observations to make an argument about how their topic impacts campus, then and now. It’s in these ways that I seek to disrupt norms and expectations about composition courses in particular and writerly identities more broadly. Even as I sought blur, this current study felt critical to nuance the distinctions and divisions that I foreground for my students in

English 101. I had to name “school” and “non-school” as if they were distinct categories before I could bridge them by the end of the semester, where an either/or could become a both/and.

The writing assignment at the heart of this study—the Advocacy Project—is the third and final of the major writing assignments in my sections of English 101. The Advocacy Project is made of two compositions: what I call the Public Text and the Rhetorical Analysis (of that Public Text). I ask the students to focus the rhetorical purpose of the Public Text on an external audience, one that must go beyond our classroom. Thus, a project that is only ever consumed by their classmates and myself does not achieve the “public” of Public Text. My fascination with this project is not only the heightened stakes that come with public compositions but also the complexity of students’ positions as the writers in this project: they are at once student and citizen, student and community member, student and rhetor. What better entry point for a line of investigation than a moment of complexity and tension?

Expectations and Choice across the History of Composition

Expectations and choice are key concepts that help me enter this study. As discussed, expectations are the implicit, explicit, or perceived possibilities and parameters for student responses. I’m most interested in only those expectations that are, in action, salient to decision-making: the ones that help me prompt from students a “successful” project and learning experience *and* that influence the activities students choose as they navigate toward the goals. From everyday experience, composition teachers may recognize the challenge of “expectations” as a concept: it is a dynamic, co-created, and messy set of meanings. Teachers and students may bring with them assumed expectations

that are never articulated or negotiated, as in, “This is an English course; obviously my students will use MLA”; “My high school English teachers always wanted me to add a title page; I’ll add a title page.”

Studying students’ behavior in response to a specific assignment, then, is one way to describe how expectations and goals are internalized or enacted (or not). A choice is any action that helps a subject move among “disconnected ‘alternatives’ and ‘options,’” no matter the intention and no matter the impact on any overall goal (Engeström “Zone” 35). A choice is inherently deterministic: to choose a real option is to foreclose other, real options. Not all choices are equally meaningful or equally consequential; choices may also be differently motivated and the decision-maker variably self-aware. A choice must be an action, however, in response to “inherent contradictions,” as in a fork that demands a change in direction when a traveler wants to proceed in exactly the direction they were headed (Roth and Lee 190). Choice may also present as a passive action; choosing to wait at the fork until another traveler comes along and gives advice is an active choice that results in a passive action. Similarly, a choice may be motivated by a goal even as it appears to take the subject farther from it; facing a fork, the traveler may decide to backtrack in pursuit of a more satisfactory route in their intended direction.

Conversations from across composition and rhetoric pedagogy help inform this study of expectations and choice. Compositionists have examined the role of choice in student writing across the field’s history; however, I would argue the conversation has carried some unexamined assumptions with it through the years. The process movement in composition and rhetoric broadened the possible ways to conceive of writing, helping teachers recognize how a student’s voice might be coaxed to the page by guiding them

through distinct writing process stages and helping them learn to recognize those stages. During the process movement, student choice is foreground for the first time, marking a distinct shift away from current-traditionalism, focused more on correction and standardization. In these pedagogies, teachers could model and prompt what were considered more generative and productive choices: knowing how to execute tasks that moved students through expected stages in a process. In some ways, students seemed to gain more freedom to explore and learn to navigate choices in these pedagogies: after all, if students were centered as the agents who must move through the process (even if a formulaic process), students may be more likely to experience a sense of ownership. Donald Murray's 1972 "Teaching Writing as a Process Not Product" explains that a process approach requires "a teacher who will respect and respond to [their] students, not for what they have done, but for what they may do; not for what they have produced, but for what they may produce, if they are given an opportunity to see writing as a process, not a product" (5). The attention to process brought with it some awareness of the consequences of writing: students learned to weigh their writing choices in response to particular rhetorical situations, desired outcomes, and potential consequences. It's from this moment that rhetorician Wilson Currin Snipes (1976) writes of the similarities between composition and chess, highlighting the ways both the process and the game build from a series of choices that allow one to navigate toward a goal (150). The limits for agency, however, may already be clear from this metaphor: although a game of chess may unfold in a staggering number of ways, play is still bound by the board, pieces, and rules presented.

Although the process movement put a new focus on navigation, the attention to process didn't necessarily result in greater empowerment for students. Given the strategic implications of choice, by the late 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, teachers began to reframe composition not as a series of stages to be completed but as a series of decisions to be made. Composition came to be seen not merely as a process of navigation but a navigation *of* choices—choices that must be navigated and weighed by real individuals, not disembodied, imagined students in isolated scenarios (Bean, Flower, Flower and Hayes, Newkirk). In her 1994 *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning: A Social Cognitive Theory of Writing*, Linda Flower extends the limited agency suggested by some pedagogies in the previous decades, such as Snipes' chess metaphor. Instead, Flower suggested students' experiences of composing are not merely strategic but also strategic in a particular, dynamic social situation, more complex and dynamic even than a game of chess (in which, yes, thousands of moves are possible). Flower studied the ways that teachers try "to encourage students to take more responsibility for their own thinking, to take their sense of purpose beyond a formulaic representation into a more fully elaborated web of intentions" (Flower 215). Composition comes to be seen as a more explicitly strategic process, exploring and troubling the ways teachers prompt, support, and perceive student writing. Although some work in these more recent years, such as Thaiss and Zawacki's (2006) on academic genres, helped the field characterize patterns of what's most commonly expected in writing conventions, scholars also became more likely to acknowledge the ways students as writers might make different choices given different purposes, audiences, and media.

Even rhetorically, the shift from “stages in a process” to “a process of decision-making” suggests students now experience greater freedom and power as growing writers, but a framework of choice has not necessarily bestowed these gifts. Indeed, the language of choice may lull composition teachers—and all faculty who mentor writers—into a false sense that they are empowering their students. Choice may be a precondition for agency, but agency is not a given: post-process movement, rhetorical *choices* may be more prevalent, but what of rhetorical *agency*?

To understand how choices relate to agency, I begin this investigation with a foundation in the wider context in which my students operate. English 101 students are primarily in their first year, enrolling in the course to satisfy a Rhetorical Communication general education requirement in the core curriculum all students must complete. I’m therefore cognizant of the way that my perceptions in this study ought to also be informed by a larger developmental frame: students are not (necessarily) writing for their discipline in my course, and students are relatively new to all forms of academic discourse (let alone that of their major’s discipline or of any of mine in English). I find it helpful, however, to consider my students’ choices in terms of the descriptive framework articulated by Thaiss and Zawacki. In creating their framework, Thaiss and Zawacki sought to understand how students learn to develop “into” savvy, conscious writers in a given academic discourse. The framework is most useful to me because it characterizes each developmental stage by how students perceive the expectations for writing. Expectations are variously understood across the four progressive stages: 1) the expectations students can identify are necessarily “what all teachers expect,” 2) the expectations are “relativistic” because students realize that teachers “all want different

things,” 3) the expectations are interpreted with a “various, complex sense of how disciplines are structured,” and 4) the expectations exist with various, complex structures but may also include directions that teachers and students will create together (139–149).

I’m drawn to the sense of possibility in this highest level in Thaiss and Zawacki’s developmental framework. In retrospect, it’s fair to say that I’ve tried to use the Advocacy Project to catapult students to that fourth level, where they must reckon with the complex and dynamic nature of expectations. Perhaps this is unrealistic given that my students are so early in their academic careers, but I believe an exploration of rhetorical agency requires I position students as active participants. If I accept students as co-creators in their educational experience, I’m also called to become more radically transparent about my expectations and more curious about how students will interpret them using their own experiences and goals. These are conditions I find essential to my English 101 course and essential to the project at the center of this study. Further, I believe that introductory and general education courses are a meaningful site to begin establishing a culture that emphasizes explicitness and agency in an ongoing process of reinvention. I suggest this type of straightforwardness begin with explicitness from the beginning of a student’s educational career, including first-year writing courses, to set the stage for students’ orientation to and active co-creation of academic discourses—and beyond. What new opportunities might teachers gain by starting these conversations earlier?

Defining Agency

Given the opportunities I have to impact students in a course like English 101, I have to consider how decision-making is conceived as a measure of agency.

Compositionists have defined rhetorical agency in various ways, but the concept is generally concerned with a rhetor's 1) recognition and 2) exercise of decision-making power. More specifically, scholar Marilyn M. Cooper insists agency is "based in individuals' lived knowledge that their actions are their own" (421). Critics of this concept, however, point to the limits of agency in settings such as the classroom. Dilip Gaonkar pushes rhetoricians to reconsider what he calls a long-held myth: the "ideology of agency," he explains, depends on too many assumptions about intentions originating from the subjects themselves, strategies being deliberate, and outcomes equally benefiting parties in a structure (263). Thus, some argue, agency in a hierarchical structure is illusion only—a performance at best. The illusion is especially easy to mistake for agency in academic situations; classroom activities are transactional and normalized, so teachers may forget that some activities must move vertically instead of horizontally.

While it may be hard to observe or capture a subject's "lived knowledge that their actions are their own," as Cooper puts it, rhetorical agency may be better understood by focusing on the activities taken up by the subject. That is, a subject executing an action is not necessarily an agent; scholars such as Cheryl Geisler explain that rhetorical agency is traditionally defined as the activity of a subject seeking a goal, but the definition is useful only in context (10). Who has the ability to choose the goal of the action? Who has access to resources for action, including knowledge about potential consequences? How will various actions be perceived and judged by audiences in this situation? While a teacher may invite the student to make "their own" choices, who's to say students will interpret

these possible actions *as* choices, let alone choices that are equally available and equally valid?

These questions suggest complicated, possibly unknowable answers. While direct measures of agency are difficult to design, *how* a subject pursues a goal may reveal more about their attitudes toward the goal, their felt ownership of that goal, and their perception of the consequences and benefits of the pursuit. Indeed, I'm particularly interested in students' self-perceptions and interpretations of the expectations, as expressed through their work in the process of crafting an assignment response. While students' social locations and personal histories influence their choices, I'm more interested in how options are navigated and less interested in trying to "diagnose" which markers "caused" which choices. Instead, by treating students' choices and stated reasoning as indirect measures, I seek descriptive theories of how agency is enacted, felt, or developed for the students in English 101.

Because Geisler's definition of rhetorical agency is goal-oriented, it follows that choice—the opportunity to make decisions—is a precondition for agency. Without even an illusion of choice, the potential experience of rhetorical agency is foreclosed. In this sense, choice is an overrated concept in composition classrooms and scholarship: "an agent makes choices" is practically a tautology. And yet, studies of rhetorical education shed light on the complexities of choice; while options are necessary in the exercise of agency, the felt impact hinges on the *substance* of available options. In composition, Thaiss and Zawacki for instance found that when students felt a sense of "freedom of choice" in their writing projects, it was most often over elements such as the topic of their writing; students were offered little flexibility, however, in "stylistic and other formal

elements” (107). If “the medium is the message,” as English scholar and philosopher Marshall McLuhan noted, topic cannot be the only dimension of the content students may direct (19). In this sense, the concept of choice is wildly underrated.

Agency is even more exciting at the level of choice because *meaningful* choices depend on the subject’s ability to recognize and weigh options. Put another way, rhetorical agency begins with rhetorical awareness. The field of cognitive psychology helps inform our understanding of how students might navigate weighty choices. In his work *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz suggests that there is work that must happen before a choice is ever presented: he argues that meaningful and satisfying decision-making requires a certain amount of experience, preparation that provides context to understand the potential consequences. Offering an unstructured choice may be as fruitless as demanding a canned performance. As Snipes notes, inexperienced writers need to develop an “awareness of the implications, immediate and consequent, of selecting and electing one option over another ... bringing about conscious limitations among the conscious choices the chessmaster may make, as distinguished from the unconscious choices of the amateur, who has not mastered the skills of anticipating the consequences of choices” (150). With what is known from composition and rhetoric as well as psychology, it’s clear that unless teachers offer a variety of valid options that carry meaning *and* can be meaningfully navigated, they are not necessarily creating a foundation for rhetorical agency.

With some reflection, however, teachers can build that foundation even with rigid expectations. In fact many faculty members are open to students making independent rhetorical choices—when rhetorical awareness is explicit. Thaiss and Zawacki’s work,

for instance, finds that many faculty are willing to accept “alternative” texts—that differ from an expected norm—“if the writer conveys to the reader a conscious awareness that [they] constructing a different kind of text and if the reason for using an alternative form is clear” (9). Awareness is the currency for choosing an unexpected rhetorical path.

The Power and Complexity of Expectations

If awareness brings “purchasing power” to the transaction of an assignment created in response to a prompt, this draws our attention to a thorny construction: the idea that a teacher’s expectations typically reign as the unexamined norm against which all student performances are judged. Teachers are imbued with this power by virtue of occupying their posts, but their imagined or idealized expectations may become normalized in their minds to the point that they appear neutral. Research shows, however, that teacher expectations are never free from the cultural, experiential, and personal forces that shape all artifacts of human activity. Thaiss and Zawacki note at least five types of standards which may influence a teacher’s expectations, including “the academic,” “the disciplinary,” “the subdisciplinary,” “the local or institutional,” and “the idiosyncratic or personal” (60). How might teachers be more reflexive about their expectations, then?

Translingual pedagogues Lu and Horner explain the futility of holding certain choices as unmarked; instead, they encourage teachers “to recognize difference and agency as in fact the norm for all writing” (592). That is, in their framework, agency is always a process of choosing among differences. Decision-making is not limited to a dichotomy of “whether [or not] to be different, given the inevitability of difference, but what kind of difference to attempt, how, and why” (Lu and Horner 592). Difference as

a/the norm suggests that everyone has choices to make because there is no static norm to either accept or reject. In this light, my concern is that teachers must learn to re-see choice, outside a dichotomy of normal (expected) and different (deviant): this requires teachers to identify and gain perspective from any unexamined norms in their own assignments and assessments.

Reflexivity is especially important given what the cognitivist movement in composition found regarding students' perception of expectations. Flower et al. (*Reading-to-Write*) describe the way students' prior educational experiences can lead them to interpret the same rhetorical situation in wildly different ways. Their work explained that these differences produce a wide variety of "task representations"—the way a writer conceives of the task at hand—of common assignments and that these differences can cause miscommunication between teachers and students about what's expected (*Reading-to-Write* 21). In fact, one part of the study found that teachers and students interpreted tasks differently 67% of the time (97). Taken together, it's clear that decentering one's expectations-as-norm requires flexibility and generosity, but it may be a fruitful step toward inviting rhetorical agency.

Teachers might be reflexive about their expectations and writers might be aware of the stakes of their choices given those expectations, but one challenge to rhetorical agency lies in the dynamic nature of "expectations": they are not static concepts. They are sets of rules, beliefs, and artifacts whose meaning is co-created moment by moment. Even rhetorically-grounded composition textbooks, such as *Everything's an Argument* (Andrea Lunsford, John J. Ruszkiewicz, and Keith Walters), seem to lose this complexity in some moments. The book emphasizes the importance of responding to teachers'

expectations, even though the editors adopt a broad rhetorical worldview in both title and premise. The editors explain how students should approach their coursework:

[T]ake careful notes when [an] assignment is given and, if possible, set up a conference to nail down your teacher's *expectations*: what will it take to convince this audience that you have done a terrific job of writing an academic argument? Beyond your instructor, you should also think of your classmates as an audience—informed, intelligent peers who will be interested in what you have to say. Again, what do you know about these readers, and what will they *expect* from your project? (Lunsford et al. 387, emphasis added)

This advice affirms the writer's studenthood as the most relevant identity marker; the teacher's expectations remain the most relevant force shaping the bounds of the writer's rhetorical agency, followed by the expectations of peers as readers. I'm drawn to the temporal element present in this advice. Notice that once the "assignment is given," the ball seems to be completely in the student's court, so to speak: the teacher as actor is also obscured by the passive voice. In the way literary texts are sometimes presented as codes to be cracked, mysteries to be discovered, so too are teacher's expectations described almost as riddles to be solved. While I won't necessarily fault the editors for presenting writers as mostly defined by their studenthood—it is a textbook, after all—my exploration of agency has turned my attention to the active, co-created nature of expectations. Instead, then, I take issue with the presumption that a teacher's expectations *can* be "nailed down" (Lunsford et al. 387). As a way of knowing, expectations are not "an innate or stable characteristic of individuals" (Roth and Lee 194).

One way to cope with the dynamic nature of expectations is explicitness: straightforward and ongoing conversations seem an obvious antidote to confused “task representations” and missed expectations. Indeed, anecdotally, my experiences as the Writing Center director at the institution where I teach show me the ways that faculty trap themselves in cycles of expectation-related anguish. Across disciplines, I often hear faculty bemoan their students’ underperformance, their inability to meet the most “basic” of expectations. Faculty become disappointed when their expectations are not met and consequently adjust them. Then, when students’ performances again fail to meet the expectations in a new and different way, the faculty become disappointed all over again, and so on. I see faculty members’ assignment sheets and syllabi through my work in the Writing Center: the “expectations” that seem so clear and vital in my conversations with these teachers are often not articulated anywhere in their teaching materials. How are students to arrive at an accurate understanding of what their faculty expect? These materials are a starting point for understanding. Even when faculty use straightforward language, reference standards, and provide examples in their materials, they may expect that these are instruction enough: they leave students to figure out how to apply the expectations to their own process, and all are disappointed when the final submissions miss the bar and receive low marks.

Another challenge to explicitness is that even reflexive teachers are unaware of how much mileage they expect from their instructional language. While some argue that common terms for academic writing—like “academic writing” itself—create necessary and unifying language to students’ benefit, studies show that such faith blurs teachers’ understanding “of just how representative their expectations for students are” (Thaiss and

Zawacki 59). Thaiss and Zawacki argue that this belief masks and displaces teachers' responsibility for communicating their expectations:

[T]he common terminology that faculty use often hides basic differences in rhetoric, exigency, epistemology, style, form, and formatting—differences that are revealed when faculty elaborate on their assignments. When very real differences are cloaked in the language of similarity, it's understandable that students would find it hard to decode what teachers want and come to see their assignments and expectations as esoteric to the teacher's disciplines, if not just idiosyncratic. (59)

With so many forces complicating our production and articulation of expectations as well as students' perceptions of those expectations, it's no wonder the field has not yet adequately distinguished the differences between the exercise of choice and the experience of agency given the explicit and implicit expectations of a specific task.

As if teachers' perpetual frustration were not issue enough in itself, the stakes of explicitness are actually quite high. Specifically, critical pedagogues (Delpit) have long identified the ways certain disempowered identity markers and certain life experiences shape a person's decision-making schema: some students are more likely to tie their sense of success and of self to their ability to respond to the expectations of authority figures. Thus, some students may more heavily weigh choices that they believe will best fulfill the teacher's expectations. Even explicitness, however, is often culturally scripted: Lisa Delpit's work *Other People's Children*, for instance, explores the ways that white, affluent educators often perceive underperformance among their students from racial minorities or low socioeconomic backgrounds; she found these students struggled to

interpret softly-worded, implicit suggestions as the teachers intended: as commands.

Delpit coined the phrase “codes of power” to refer to such communication styles, ones that created invisible barriers. Certain students, it seems, always bear the burden of navigating the complexities of expectations as they cross cultural lines: students from marginalized groups, such as racial minorities, tend to expend this energy most.

Sometimes this was the type of issue I witnessed in the Writing Center, that dissonance between what teachers claimed they expected and what they explicitly asked for. Often, unwritten or implicit rules are naturalized only for those with statuses of privilege. A study of expectations throughout the composition process, then, necessarily has consequences on the construction of student agency.

Before appreciating how students experience agency, though, I must acknowledge the ways in which teachers and students may understand each other and still miss each other’s expectations. Even as a student successfully navigates what’s expected and recognizes what choices are available, performance still depends on their ability to see these things realized in their texts. Thaiss and Zawacki found that even when they do seem to be able to identify a teacher’s key values, students are often not enacting those values in their work (101). These researchers also note the many ways that students may plan more content and more complex rhetorical moves than ever make it to final drafts. This disconnect may be related to the ways that students’ perceptions of their performances differ from their teachers’. The previously mentioned study from Flower et al., for instance, suggests that students tend to view their texts as complex at a much greater rate than their teachers do (*Reading-to-Write* 97). And as I discovered in my own study, students sometimes also make tremendously savvy moves without intention, quite

by accident: it's possible for them to act without making active choices. To put this back into the language of games, I feel I must account for dynamic, cognitive process of composing in a school setting because without it teachers cannot come to a realistic analysis of students' understanding of the rules, their choices throughout the game, or their assessment of their own performance: my analysis will mean little if I fail to account for the fact that my students believed we were playing soccer while I believed we were playing basketball. And even then, I must acknowledge that the playing field is not level for all students.

A Dynamic Methodological Framework

My study of expectations and agency thus requires an analytical framework with room for complexity and change over time. Taking the cue from many educational researchers across the last several decades, the framework comes from activity theory: as a sociocultural framework, activity theory creates space to analyze a dynamic process of co-creation. Particularly, in this study, activity theory helps provide common language and structures for identifying the playing field and the rules as perceived by each set of players, so to speak: thus, this framework sets the scene for analysis. Whereas other research may consider just one type of artifact for examination—such as teachers' syllabi alone or a student draft alone—the interest of this study lies in the messy space of “What happens?” with agency given a set of expectations governing the situation. I treat the composition process as a whole as the site of the study, a space where each step of interpretation, application, or discussion may contribute not only to all parties' understanding of the task but also to the construction of a product. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky developed his strain of activity theory as he was concerned with this

“fullness of life,” characterized by contradictions and tensions—which are inescapable for educators in pursuit of praxis (Roth and Lee 187). He meant activity theory to reflect the complexity of an “embodied mind” that performs across “social and material environments” (Roth and Lee 189). In educational research, activity theory has offered many researchers the means to study real classroom experiences: it allows teachers to investigate problems in these dynamic settings on the road to “recovering more humane forms of education” (Roth and Lee 188).

The environment of an activity is a constructed context: it influences and is influenced by those actors within it. Throughout this study, I refer to this environment most often as the “setting” of the activity or the activity “system,” which Engeström, Engeström, and Kärkkäinen defines as “a complex and relatively enduring ‘community of practice’ that often takes the shape of an institution. Activity systems are enacted in the form of individual, goal-directed actions” (320). Activity, then, is not necessarily a performance of discrete or linear actions but a collection of “multiple simultaneous tasks” (Engeström et al. 320). I take the institution of Doane University as the setting of this study. This setting includes a variety of literal and figurative arenas—such as the physical spaces of the classroom and the Writing Center or forms of infrastructure such as grading and institutional assessment—but each actor also brings varying representations of the setting.

Activity theory is particularly interesting for educational scholars because class settings are mediational spaces—“contexts for human development” through activity (Smagorinsky 67). Meaning is created and problems are solved “socially (i.e., by immediate human interactions, such as those involved in particular classroom episodes,

e.g., when a classroom is conducted according to a teacher's preferred pattern of interaction, such as a lecture or discussion)"... (Smagorinsky 68). The social affordances of activity theory are most relevant to my study because social "settings provide constraints—i.e., those limitations that help to focus activity on what is most productive toward cultural ends—and affordances—i.e., those factors that promote opportunities toward those same ends—that channel, limit, and support learners' efforts to adopt the prevailing social practices" (Smagorinsky 68). Thus, because of my authority, freedom, and obligations as the teacher, I am more part of the setting than I am another subject or agent alongside the students. A setting isn't entirely deterministic, but it may guide decision-making as it suggests the significance of various choices (Smagorinsky 69).

Within a given setting, people "*divide the work* in interlocking fashion," though generally, those involved in the division of labor could be any subjects without whose participation "the outcomes would not exist" (Roth and Lee 194, emphasis in original). Since I require certain (grade-bearing) social interactions throughout the composition process, additional subjects are necessarily part of the project, including the students' fellow classmates, Writing Center consultants, and myself. The division of labor for each of these subjects is usually indicated by the members' "roles in group" or role "in society" (Roth and Lee 198). For instance, generally, the teacher initiates and assesses the performance; classmates and consultants offer feedback along the way. The rules can include the "codes of interaction" or "ethics" of the practices used in the community (Roth and Lee 198). In a setting such as an educational institution, rules are commonly framed as either sanctioned practices (such as my classroom practice of using MLA

Style) or prohibited behavior (Doane's student code of conduct considers plagiarism an academic integrity violation).

As I'm interested in how expectations (one type of "rules," in an activity framework), this study necessarily searching for markers of how students interpret and act upon their understanding of the setting. A study of praxis, indeed, is one of the big affordances of activity theory. These methods are most appropriate to this study for the way they bridge the theory-practice gap: activity theory's focus on "historical primacy of material, work-related activity" serves my research site well (Roth and Lee 210). In my analysis, I use the heuristic known as the activity triangle to get "the lay of the land," to describe the landscape of each student process studied. This concept creates a map of interdependent forces at play in an activity system, the resources accessed, and the products collaboratively invented or repurposed. By bringing all these forces and materials into view at once, I am able to "see" how a theory or concept—like an assignment expectation—impacted or was made concrete by the writers.

Scholars have used the activity triangle in many ways. While webs of activity may be variously defined, in one common formulation (see fig. 1), the points of the triangle include 1) the tools ("Mediating artifacts": signs, mode, and media used in the activity), 2) the subject (actor or rhetor), and 3) the object (goal or motive).

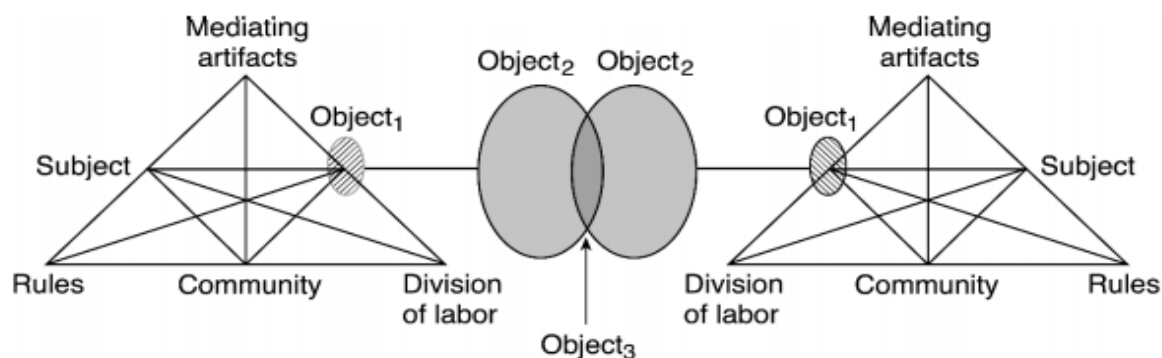


Fig. 1: Activity Triangle. In his essay “Expansive Learning” (2001), Engeström traces the transformation of the activity triangle, suggesting that the present “third generation” of activity theory allows scholars to combine triangles to show the ways that arenas of activity interact with one another (138).

We might also imagine the space around, behind, and extending from this primary triangle as the social context, which imposes rules and offers community expectations. In my study, this language offers ways of mapping the terrain of the composition process; “rules,” for example, can help me capture relevant descriptions of norms, conventions, and other external prescriptions that may be impacting students’ rhetorical choices throughout the project. In this frame, subjects’ historical contexts (experiences) can be accounted for, perhaps as assumed “rules” that the student brings with them from the past, as assumptions about their goal, or as tools to apply in this new situation. Tensions among the subjects’ positions can also be addressed, considering that I’m asking students to operate both as students and as citizens in a wider sense. In his essay “Expansive Learning” (2001), Engeström traces the transformation of the activity triangle, suggesting that the present “third generation” of activity theory allows scholars to combine triangles to show the ways that activity systems interact with each other (138). Activity triangles

can overlap and interconnect. In particular, I can tease out the ways that the assignment submission (manifested by the end of the project as Object₃ in fig. 1) was forged through the interaction of the student's personal or public goal and the student's classroom goal. This visualization represents how multiple webs network together, even within a single setting: the university. Activity theory allows me to consider which web of activity—our classroom, the school administration, a campus group—seems to bear most on a student's rhetorical choices at various points in the Advocacy Project.

Structure of the Study

With an activity theory framework, I am able to make sense of the broad starting point and rich data set of this study, to capture and analyze the dynamic composing process as my students completed the Advocacy Project in one section of English 101. I began with the overarching research question I've asked various ways already: *What is the relationship between expectation and rhetorical agency?* To investigate this question, this study considers the following:

- Which rhetorical choices do students seem to perceive as expected, naturalized, or otherwise unmarked?
- How do students' perceptions of my expectations seem to affect their rhetorical decision-making?
- How do other expectations (their own for themselves, those they've learned from previous experiences, their peers', their outside audiences', etc.) seem to affect their rhetorical decision-making?

- How do students characterize their rhetorical agency in this writing project? How do students feel rhetorical agency (as a phenomenon distinct from and more complex than rhetorical decision-making)?

My choice of this class underscores my interest in exploring the dynamic, “messy” spaces of composition: although it is not a “first-year” course, English 101 fulfills a general education requirement and (anecdotally) is perceived by many academic advisers as a foundational, transferable experience students’ ought to complete early in their academic career. Thus, many English 101 sections are filled with students in their first year on campus with an occasional student with sophomore standing (whether in their first or second year on campus). On our particular campus, Doane University students represent what many would call a “traditional” undergraduate population: most students are entering Doane directly following high school. According to the most recent data from Doane’s Office of Institutional Research, the residential campus in rural Crete, Nebraska, enrolls just more than 1,000 undergraduate students a year, offering bachelor’s degrees of art and of science (1, 3). About 75% of students are from Nebraska; only 17% identify as having a “multicultural” background; 34% are first-generation college students (Doane University Office of Institutional Research 1). The most common majors include biology, education, and business, although students from any major may end up enrolled in English 101.

At Doane, English 101 is called “English Composition: The Writing Seminar,” a compound title that seems to reflect the winding, disputed, multivocal identity of introductory composition across the history of higher education. The study was conducted in one section of English 101: all students consented to have me use their

coursework for this educational study, and three students consented to and participated in voluntary follow-up interviews after completion of the course and the finalizing of grades. Among the relevant coursework, I particularly focused on the following artifacts, which all students were asked to complete as part of the normal activities of the course:

1. the annotations students are asked to make as they read the syllabus,
2. students' annotations of the Advocacy Project assignment sheet,
3. students' author's notes (which accompanied a draft that went to small writing groups for peer response),
4. students' feedback for the peer response process (both what they offered others and what others offered them),
5. my feedback on students' final submissions, and
6. students' annotated self-evaluations of the finished project.

In addition, I analyzed audio recordings of

7. students' individual, in-person consultations with me on a draft,
8. students' in-person consultations with a Writing Center peer undergraduate consultant on a draft, and
9. the voluntary follow-up interview, with selected students who agreed to participate.

After an initial review of these data, I began to analyze what I observed based on my questions and review of relevant literature. Important points of interest included any explicit references to expectations (either my articulations or students' voiced perceptions of them); references to external expectations (such as those of previous teachers or other experiences that produced strategic knowledge); statements of purpose (or peer

interpretations of other writers' rhetorical purposes); conflicts (whether in the form of conflicting goals or a mismatch of goals and resources); and deviations from the expectations of the project (especially those moves that seemed to be assignment deviations but still supported the students' rhetorical goal). I attempted to target the interviews to help me learn about any issues that I didn't believe the class artifacts could reveal, such as beliefs about motivation or how students applied any previous knowledge and experiences to interpret and respond to expectations in the project.

The three participants studied here were chosen after an initial review of all coursework-related data: I identified students whose processes, if more deeply analyzed, could reveal rich tensions in a variety of project topics, scopes, and genres. Because of my interest in studying the relationship between expectations and agency as it plays out in a dynamic a process, I center and organize this study by the three students most closely studied. Competing forces are best understood in the context of the systems in which activity occurs. Thus, the chapters of this study explore each of the three selected students in turn. While an activity framework and this organization allow me to give attention to the social locations in which each student was situated, I do not spend much energy considering the role of specific identity markers as whole categories. Unless the students themselves explicitly named or discussed a marker of difference in their process or in the interview, specific markers such as race or gender are not considered in a systematic way in this study: even within individual students' composing processes, it would be difficult to tease out the influence of a single marker on the decision-making process. Further, I only engaged those details that I believed would add context to the analysis *without* relying on sweeping assumptions or generalizations not otherwise supported in my

teaching experiences. Important educational research helps me understand more about these phenomena across populations, but this study instead takes each chapter to consider a student and their experience interpreting expectations, navigating the decision-making process, and producing a text that attempts to enact various goals. I discuss only relevant markers that did emerge in the data, although generalizable claims do not necessarily follow from these moments in the discussion.

Chapter 2 centers on a student who approached the Advocacy Project as an opportunity for personal growth. She began with a broad topic (LGBTQIA awareness and community) that she was able to ground in a specific, targeted way, deferring to the needs and desires of a campus organization to ground her process. In this chapter, I consider how my students build their conceptions of the project—similar to Flower’s concept of task representation—and what it means to create a “text.” This point of tension allows for a deeper exploration of how students’ interpret expectations: what is the imagined product of this activity? This discussion is further rooted in what Russell explored as activity theory’s implications for genre and, therefore, agency. This student’s insights, especially during the interview stage, reveal some limitations and questions regarding how development happens—or doesn’t—across similar assignments over time, leaving me with questions about how projects like the Advocacy Project ought to be scaffolded and prompted. Within the frame of the activity triangle, I pose possibilities about how teachers might leverage students’ abilities and experiences coming into a project like this, given what can be illuminated with an activity analysis: is past educational experience always a tool or resource students bring to a new situation? What are its limits in new situations?

Chapter 3 considers the process of a student who chose a less traditional medium that turned out to align profoundly with his rhetorical purpose and message. This student, too, took a very direct approach on what could be considered a global issue; indeed, the genre lent it instant immediacy. This student also saw the project as a step in their own personal development, although the story of this project prompts important questions about the role of intentionality in agency. In mapping the levels of activity at play in this student's process, I discuss the implications for teachers around the issue of scope: how do teachers intervene or assess a process of composition when a student's rhetorical awareness involves obvious imbalances, such as when they aim a large or vague "ask" or purpose at a specific strategic audience or when they aim a clear and manageable rhetorical purpose at an unwieldy or vague audience? This chapter also unlocks a line of thinking about my own unexamined expectations in a way that may be of service to other composition teachers: in what ways is awareness a necessary ingredient in agency? In what ways must an agential choice be felt?

Chapter 4 explores the savvy moves of a student who zoomed in on a local issue and a local response. Although he identified the project through a personal interest, this student applies traditional academic rhetorical skills to impact his audience outside the classroom, revealing a penchant for intertextuality and putting texts in conversation with one another. Through the lens of activity, I discuss how teachers might re-see agency as a relationship among resources or tools and audience, leading me to further my exploration of my own previously unexamined expectations. This student's process also poses implications for how multiple student subjectivities might be a resource for practicing

agency that still helps students begin to see themselves as agents beyond the classroom walls.

Although these chapters intertwine these students' experiences with their classmates', Chapter 5 also takes the time and space to consider overarching discoveries, surprises, patterns, and implications from throughout the study, including calls for further research based on issues unearthed. By giving the sustained attention to the complexities of the composition process of a single writing project, this study seeks to contribute a rich narrative to composition's praxis literature. Introductory composition courses are already fraught spaces: my assignments invite students to create something "for" themselves, to embrace the complex situation they enter as English 101 students. If teachers seek to develop whole citizens—who will be performing rhetorical acts in mostly non-academic realms for the rest of their lives—I suggest turning the analytical gaze to this dynamic space. This study is an opportunity to bring expectations and agency together and ask, "What happens?" Without this type of reflexive approach, even critical pedagogues in composition risk taking for granted the dynamic construction and life of expectations and how they impact their students' choices, performance, and experiences. This study offers a model of how teachers might slow down and turn their attention to praxis as it's currently happening in a composition process. I suggest that teachers may be missing some of the most fruitful cues for what's happening with agency, power, and motivation as students compose. My hope is that this project invites pause, offering examples of the types of moments and discoveries that emerged for me—but that might also help composition teachers hone their own reflexivity around expectations and opportunities for agency.

Of course, I would be remiss to make any suggestions or promises about my work without putting the potential contributions in perspective. Just as Eodice, Geller, and Lerner explain that their (frankly wonderful) work in *The Meaningful Writing Project* will not necessarily be “applicable” in any higher education context (21), I too suggest that this is neither my claim nor my goal. Instead, my work will provide a model of how other teachers might deeply reflect upon their own practices, pay more attention to what happens in their particular students’ interpretive acts, and consider the possible consequences for rhetorical agency in their own courses. The usefulness will be context-bound and individualized, though further research investigating the dynamic spaces among expectations and agency may help identify patterns across contexts.

I ought to also say that I will not be, by the end of this work, prescribing what a composition teacher’s expectations ought to be or how they ought to be articulated. Just as my former University of Nebraska–Lincoln program-mate Lesley Bartlett argues of norms,

I’m not making an argument against “appropriate” performances. Rather, I am arguing for a more nuanced and expansive understanding of the “appropriate” on the part of students and teachers. I am inviting writing teachers to rethink the way we teach students what they “should” do. . . . I’m asking teachers to help students learn to recognize how “shoulds” are constructed and value-laden. This recognition is crucial if students are to become rhetorically agile writers and thinkers. (Bartlett 6–7)

If teachers after a richer understanding of empowerment, of students’ access to and realization of rhetorical agency, the work ahead of us demands nothing less.

CHAPTER 2

BUILDING MODELS, FEELING COMPOSITION:

“WHAT’S A TEXT?”

Sarah was older than the other students: in our small class of mostly first-year students, she had sophomore standing. She sat near the front of the room and used one of the tables, meant for two, to spread out with her notebook, pens, planner, and (often) a large iced or blended coffee drink from the shop on campus. Her use of space—not noteworthy in itself, excepting any impacts gendered communication has on use of space—came back to me as I analyzed her artifacts for this study. Although she was admittedly “different” from the other students, Sarah also seemed at ease claiming and using what was available to do her best work, the best way she knew how. She sat apart from the rest of the students in our classroom, and, in some ways, her work figuratively sat apart as well.

Her familial experiences were a big influence on her sense of self, Sarah reported. Sarah’s younger brother was diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome after being adopted into the family. He experienced a number of challenges throughout his childhood that marked him as “different” than the children around him. Sarah said she quickly became used to advocating for him: “a lot of [my] standing up for people comes from my brother.” Sarah had for years worked to become forthright in her communication, drawing boundaries early in relationships so that people understood how things would be.

“I think it was starting in high school,” Sarah explained, “when the word ‘retarded’ was very popular.” Now, she said, “the first thing I say to some of my friends when we start discussing things that we’re sensitive about, I say, ‘Whatever you do ... do

not use that word around me. At all. Because I will tell you to knock it off. I will tell you to stop, and if you do not, I will punch you in a friendly way.” She said this helped her protect the people she cared about and to make clear the issues that mattered to her.

It makes sense, then, that Sarah chose to position herself as an ally and pseudo-consultant to others in the project studied here. Many of her friends, she said, were part of the LGBTQIA community as well as a campus group for folks from and allies of that community: she decided to use her project to raise awareness for this relatively young campus group. Sarah reported that her friends on campus are what inspired the scope for her project. Through their accounts and her observations of their experiences at school, she had come to appreciate the importance of funded groups like the LGBTQIA one: the Student Congress had agreed to recognize and set aside activity monies for the group as a campus organization, giving the group an “official” presence and voice on campus it hadn’t had in several years. Continuing this momentum seemed natural to Sarah, she said, given that “sticking up for other people” had become second nature.

Childhood to college, her social experiences gave Sarah a sense of allyship and advocacy from early in life. Sarah, however, was quick to tell me that she does not identify as belonging to the LGBTQIA community: in fact, when I asked whether she was a member of the student group itself, Sarah explained, “I show up now and then cuz that’s what my schedule allows, but I’m not technically in the group because I’m not on their roster, but a lot of my friends are.” Despite this attendance and the open membership of the group, Sarah still did not see herself as part of it. This lack of membership—on at least two levels—seemed striking considering the rich and powerful project Sarah was able to create. As she discovered throughout the process, to “read, talk,

and write with others” helps students “realize their own situatedness” (Kerschbaum 79). Even as she described her life for me—such as her love of K-pop music—she rarely spoke of unifying forces, things that bonded her with others. Instead, as with K-pop, she said her affinities often created more distance between herself and others.

Of course, an affinity for a niche genre of music carries different stakes than minority sexual identities and expressions do. Although she was not aware of this, Sarah’s project occurred in the wake of several key moments regarding issues of diversity in the wider setting of Doane University. Doane’s undergraduate Crete campus has experienced many iterations of diversity and inclusion efforts, offices, organizations, and dedicated positions. An allyship group had existed on campus but fizzled in the years before the Supreme Court struck down state bans of same-sex marriage. That 2015 ruling, however, prompted action on our little campus. After student media reported the community’s support for the ruling, the Westboro Baptist Church targeted Doane. The hate group planned a protest across the street from campus, but students responded with love; they created a grassroots slate of events called Doane Is Love, celebrating inclusion. The celebration became a tradition on Doane’s Crete campus, although its focus and gathering effect have become diluted over the years. While the event has at times included campus-wide marches, invited speakers, and free t-shirts with inclusive messaging for hundreds of students, the most recent iteration of the event did not reference any particular minority, marginalized, or oppressed groups or set of identities; “swag” marking the occasion was purchased only for those students who helped staff the events; the summary of the event’s history provided in advertisements failed to mention what was being protested and being celebrated at that initial rally in our campus outdoor

theatre. Between that first Doane Is Love event and Sarah's arrival on campus, what had been a Queer-Straight Alliance resurfaced as PRISM, a self-styled LGBTQIA advocacy and ally group.

This context was part of the setting Sarah entered in this project, although much of her process was more about navigating composition goals and subgoals to serve friends in the PRISM group. To consider what Sarah's Advocacy Project might teach me about the relationship between expectations and agency, first her work must be placed into the social framework of activity theory. I visualize the assignment as a network of two interlocking activity triangles, as the assignment involves both a public activity (with an audience and rhetorical purpose students must direct *outside* our classroom) and classroom activity (the project *as* a graded assignment). Because Sarah's topic and aims concern other campus community members, I take Doane University as the overall activity setting in which both these activities occur.

Typically, the three points of an activity triangle include subject, object, and tools, each working together in this framework to illuminate how activity occurs and how agency functions. Activity theorist David R. Russell explains that tools are "material objects in use ... to accomplish some action with some outcome" (511). In fact, tools *must* be put to use; materiality is not the only defining quality (511). All tools may be used across a network of triangles, including in this case the triangle for the public activity as well as the triangle for the classroom activity. Tools may support any stage of an activity, whether a primary goal—called the object of the activity—or a subgoal that helps the subject approach the object. I organize this analysis by drawing a rough boundary between subject and object, incorporating the subject's use of tools throughout

those two related discussions. All told, the things that happen among the points of the activity triangle help shed light on important layers of Sarah's process—and her sense of agency.

Subject

As the object of activity is shaped by the writer's subjectivity (or subjectivities), first I consider how Sarah's sense of self bore on her process. Russell defines the subject of activity simply as "the agent(s) whose behavior" is being studied (510). I am interested in how Sarah seemed to understand herself as a student completing a class project as well as how she understood herself as a rhetor helping solve a problem outside the classroom.

Studenthood in Action

First, as an agent working on a classroom activity, Sarah reported in her interview that she thought she generally understood the assignment from the very beginning. She was really motivated, she said, more so by the public goal of the project than the project as an assignment, however: "I'm not too worried about grades ... especially in writing because I like to write." Problems such as correcting grammar or covering all the expected content, she said, are things she always considers, no matter the assignment. To her, these expectations were givens: they did not factor into her process as unique challenges.

Her understanding of herself as an already competent student-writer gave Sarah the space to focus on her role as an advocate for the group she chose to work with. From her annotations on the assignment sheet, it's clear that Sarah saw her role in the process as one who was "making a larger picture," "starting small and growing," and creating "something that impacts [the] community." In this language, I hear a sense of agency—

recognizing and acting on something within her control—but also a sense of perspective and purpose. Although she seemed to see herself as a strong student and a strong writer, her annotations suggest that the project was more meaningful in a developmental sense, as in the language of growth. Perhaps Sarah’s experiences as a sophomore contributed to her understanding of not only composition processes but also composition as a process—a process in which she was a rhetor located within some sort of “larger picture.”

After settling on a topic—the campus LGBTQIA group, PRISM—she had to navigate a new social role. Yes, “the majority” of her close friends were members of this group or identified as LGBTQIA, but “no one really knows PRISM,” she reported in our interview. From her perspective, the group needed more of an online presence to become more visible to other campus community members. She initiated some casual conversations, and her friends in PRISM agreed it was an interesting idea. They were open to it. The group already had a public Facebook page—a product of this same project in a section of English 101 a year earlier, incidentally—so Sarah decided a complementary Twitter page might help the group reach a wider audience. At the very least, as Sarah mentioned during our interview, Twitter was more fitting anyway: Sarah said her perception was that “older people” use Facebook while more of her peers were active on Twitter. Her friends in PRISM agreed, although this support didn’t come through the way Sarah had imagined it would.

Sarah’s language about herself as the subject, early in the project, seemed to position her as a sort of consultant or content creator, someone subordinate to the PRISM group members—who also happened to be her friends. “I had texted them,” she explained in the Rhetorical Analysis, and she had contacted PRISM’s elected officers to

ask “what kind of information would you like on the page, do you have an idea of how you would want it to look, anything specific you want, who should I give the login information to?” However, “contacting them to get approval was a lot harder than I thought.” It seems her initial sense was that to help them advocate for their group, Sarah would be a conduit. She even slipped into the passive voice when explaining that composition happened as “information was passed from them to me to the [Twitter] page,” mostly in conversations “in person.” Most of the time, however, she could not get a response or the response would be along the lines of “I don’t know.”

Sarah’s lack of membership—from the LGBTQIA community as well as the campus group—may have contributed to her insistence on centering her object on the group’s wishes. When guidance didn’t materialize, it became a source of frustration. Although Sarah never indicated that these conversations (or lack of conversations) affected her relationships with these friends, she did express dismay in our interview that her friends wouldn’t be more responsive when the questions were for a graded project. Her studenthood seemed more pressing in this moment than what the communication patterns “meant” for her friendships.

Even Sarah’s strong sense of herself as a student was producing tradeoffs. Sarah was about as prepared as any student could be for all graded and scheduled milestones in the project (and the class), but she told me after the fact that she had not been feeling confident in the project before she reached the individual consultation with me. At this checkpoint, I ask students to bring a full “draft” of whatever their Public Text might be, whether a poster, an email, or a series of social media posts. Before we met, she said,

Sarah feared that she was not doing the project in the “correct” way or meeting the assignment expectations.

She opened our consultation by commenting on how she saw herself as out of step with her classmates: because her project “was a tweet,” she knew it was “a little different from what all the other kids are doing.” Though none of students in her peer response group were doing social media projects, I pointed out that there were in fact several other projects in the class using Twitter, including a project that was a single retweet with a comment and another that was a single tweet with some images of screenshot text. “Really?” she responded. “Okay.”

Sarah’s subjecthood, self-described as “different” helps account for why her apprehension about her choice did not stall the composing process. Composition research shows that differences are especially evident in students’ metalanguage for revision and levels of revision. While less experienced writers try to “fix” texts during revision, more experienced ones had deeper metalanguage, such as Sarah’s ability to keep the wider rhetorical goal of “starting small and growing” in mind (Flower et al. “Detection” 17). More experienced writers are also not hampered by uncertainty. Instead, as Sarah demonstrated, more experienced writers check their urge to revise, question, and tinker as they draft to the extent that it interferes with producing a complete attempt at the text (Flower et al. “Detection” 18). A more experienced writer is better able to hold off and return to any lingering issues later, typically to their benefit. Revisiting a completed draft gives the more experienced writer a chance to reflect and construct a better “working image of the text,” as Sarah was able to do with me during our consultation (Flower et al. “Detection” 18).

The ability to hold concerns at bay during drafting is also related, however, to a student's understanding of the setting in which they're performing. I don't have the evidence to ascribe all of Sarah's control to her class standing or writing experiences, but the social nature of rhetorical activity may help me account for her ability to maintain momentum. Between the ways she hit all major checkpoints in the project and talked about the process after the fact, I believe Sarah was able to use her various subjectivities to help her navigate points of tension. She seemed at ease switching back and forth between donning her student cap, as it were, and donning a friend cap to try to get answers from PRISM members. Despite her concerns, Sarah demonstrated both the ability to see an idea through and the ability to toggle between subject positions in the two activity triangles ("classroom" and "public"). She seemed to have the skill sets necessary to "trust the process," as so many composition teachers are fond of saying.

Flower et al. suggest that the type of perspective Sarah demonstrated is necessary: without it, writers' main aims get subsumed or derailed by minor barriers, conflicts, and uncertainty ("Detection" 18). Trust, then, might be a necessary ingredient in activity toward a goal—no matter the object of that trust (their own abilities, their role or "job" in the project, or the teacher). Is trust learned through experience, or can it be "earned" within the relationships at play in a given assignment? All this is to say, I wonder to what extent Sarah's abilities are a signal of some quality within her as the subject and to what extent they signal supportive qualities of the environment in which she was acting? For instance, in her syllabus annotations early in the semester, she wrote, "Don't give up" near some of my guidance to students: am I to read this note as a paraphrase of my messaging or as Sarah's note-to-self?

This syllabus annotation was just one early moment in Sarah's process: more clues to her sense of agency surfaced across the semester. I've rooted my understanding of rhetorical agency in a similar spirit as Marilyn M. Cooper's definition, which suggests agency is "based in individuals' lived knowledge that their actions are their own" (421). I would suggest, though, that one's sense of agency is not isolated moment by moment. Educational researchers have grappled much in recent decades with the concept of transfer. Eodice, Geller, and Lerner suggest that transfer is development across time as a student brings prior "knowledge in or application out" of a learning moment (84). Entangled with agency, then, is a student's ability to connect present opportunities with their past experiences and future aspirations. Through the lens of activity theory, I notice that Sarah's sense of her own subjecthood was not limited to who she had been or was at the moment; instead, her past and future selves figured into her sense of subjecthood. Further, she was able to "network"—to borrow the theoretical term—her *current classroom activity* with *imagined future public activity*. As Sarah noted in her Rhetorical Analysis, "Sometimes I feel like so many people focus on the future rather than seeing what they can do in the present to affect the future." Sarah's shifting subjectivity was a crucial foundation to her feelings of agency in this project, as I next expand beyond the context of the student-teacher relationship to explore how Sarah viewed herself more broadly as a public agent.

Agentive Action

Central to an agentive subjecthood, in any activity context, is self-efficacy. It's foundational to consider to what extent students believe that creating connections and applications is within their control. A sense of control was evident throughout Sarah's

project materials. Not only did she view the project as an opportunity for personal development, but even her metalanguage to her peers was tinged with “freedom to” rhetoric, as I will explain. For context, this rhetoric (as opposed to “freedom from” rhetoric) privileges ability. As psychology scholar Sheena Iyengar explains, this rhetoric of choice suggests “the ‘freedom to’ attain certain outcomes and realize our full potential” (63). “Freedom from” rhetoric suggests having to resist and defy imposition, interference, and other “shackles” from without (Iyengar 63). Sarah’s “freedom to” metalanguage throughout her work suggests that her sense of agency wasn’t hers alone: she saw the project as an opportunity for all the students to try new things, forge their own texts, and control their own process.

This became especially clear in her talk with other students, during the peer response process. For context, I ask my students to print and annotate others’ drafts with a pen, responding as readers (as opposed to a proofreader or editor) and focusing on rhetorical choices and their impact on audience. I also ask students to compose a four-paragraph “letter” to the writer, offering, in turn, responses that describe, celebrate, challenge, and support (provide suggestions for) the writing. Sarah’s group included two other writers, including Aaron, whose work is the subject of the next chapter. To Aaron, Sarah tried to respond knowing that Aaron—like all the students—were mid-process. Her responses referred to Aaron’s work as “what you had decided to do” and “what you wanted to stand up for.” She also praised the moves Aaron had already covered in his work by using language such as “I like that you were able to...” These examples are striking because of their focus on decision-making, intentionality, and possibility. Even her supportive prompts to Aaron came through in a similar spirit: “Why did you want to

choose this to write on?"; "For you[r] next draft try to include ... what you would like to see from it and who you are impacting"; and "Why this choice?" With her other group member, "freedom to" language shines through as well, including more language about ability:

- "how *you were able* to touch on ... topics that a lot of other people are afraid to discuss"
- "I think you were able..."
- "you were able to express your emotions"
- "you were able to cover a lot of things..."

Although I am encouraged by the hope and possibility in Sarah's "freedom to" language in her responses to peers, this runs counter to many narratives in higher education as well American culture writ large. Iyengar points out that historians have long asserted that from its founding, this nation built its rhetoric around "freedom from" models of agency and power: freedom from oppression, freedom from any external forces that keep individuals from succeeding (Iyengar 70). The "American dream," she notes, depends not on an individual's ability to do as they so choose but on their ability to overcome any barriers in the way of that choice. Of course, the distribution of "barriers" and resources to "overcome" them is varied. To me, then, "freedom to" language feels more promising than "freedom from" language. Students like Sarah, who can recognize possibility as it's unfolding, seem to be the ones with the ability to keep going. Some students are quick to self-diagnose problems in the writing process, but naming what's working and following it?—that seems to be the rarer and more productive skill.

The feedback Sarah received during the peer response process helped her understand what was working and what could be pushed in her own project as well. One fellow writer wrote to her that the Twitter page “follows the assignment very well,” although he noted that she might consider “the addition of standalone tweets, just random uplifting messages here and there. Not too many to become annoying but just some relatable, friendly tweets every other day or so. Also, involving the community would be cool, setting up polls or threads to comment on.” This writer didn’t phrase it this way, but although he indicated he found the page effective, he seemed to sense a lack of specific identity. The content was helping fulfill the assignment obligations for Sarah as a student; as a community-builder, however, Sarah could create more chances for connection.

Sarah continued to add content to the page, guided by this classmate as well as the Writing Center consultant she worked with. While her classmate was familiar with the project topic from the beginning, the consultant got to be a test audience: the consultant had never heard of the group, Sarah said, so they helped her decide how to frame the way the group was described in the “bio” section of the page. In our interview, Sarah said that all these different interactions throughout the composition process were useful, for moments like this. She told me that as a student, she was used to “putting up with that amount of work”: having so many drafts and stages in the process was “slower,” she said, but students who are “close-minded” about all these steps are the ones who see them as hurdles instead of opportunities. As a student, Sarah seemed to recognize the value of the social nature of her learning. She explained in our interview that it was all these conversations along the way that helped her complete her work well. She even

paraphrased all these little moments for me in a dialogic way: “Ooh, there’s an idea: hold onto it.”

Sarah persevered through a challenging project and created a rich resource for a group she cared about. Her story could be held up as a model of process: she kept going, despite uncertainties, disconnects, and other felt concerns. While certain individual factors and histories in her subjectivity may have shaped her “success”—in process and product—this analysis of agency in rhetorical decision-making reminds me to pay attention to how students mark themselves, as different, as normal, and as rhetors moving through activities. Stephanie L. Kerschbaum draws on Bakhtin’s ethical work as she theorizes difference, suggesting that interaction and relative identities are created in particular fleeting moments. Individuals have a “responsibility, [Bakhtin] argues, to make the most of every moment. To accept this responsibility is to maintain an openness to the Other, to keep possibilities open rather than to close them off” (Kerschbaum 68). This kairotic responsibility brings with it a sense of space, for students but also for teachers. Teachers must keep possibilities—which is to say, space in which to maneuver—open.

In fact, Sarah’s past experiences supported this idea that a student’s sense of themselves isn’t enough: the opportunities must keep building on each other across a student’s formal education *and* personal experiences. It was only in retrospect that Sarah noticed what previous experiences might have motivated her project. While I expected to find evidence of how past academic work influencing her current composition process, Sarah showed me that it was the unconscious impact of the memories and experiences and not the cognitive details or experiences that mattered. During our interview, in my attempt to replicate a small part of Eodice, Geller, and Lerner’s project, I too asked

Sarah, “Had you previously written anything similar to this project? How did that influence this project?” The authors note that such questions try to suss out “how prior learning does or does not impact new learning” (81). Their findings showed that “personal connection” (a “family or close connection to the topic or issue, passion, interest, future career connection”) was the most relevant type of answer students brought to these questions (90). Sarah answered that yes, she had done something similar before. In elementary school, she remembered, students were asked to write a letter to a representative. It was in the 5th grade; she could not remember the topic or issue at hand, but she said she distinctly remembered “clicking the button” (the message was an email, as she recalled).

When I asked what made it memorable, she said it was coming to mind because it was one the first times her thinking expanded beyond her own town or her own experiences, since she remembered this being aimed at some sort of statewide issue. It was these feelings—not unlike her description of “sticking up for” her brother—that connected these memories to the Advocacy Project, not the literal process of composing the message or completing the assignment. In all these similar situations, Sarah was able to find actionable ways to respond (“responsibly”) to her feelings. While this process requires some emotional risk and energy, navigating conflict is necessary to a process of coming to understanding, of working toward common (co-created) goals. Kerschbaum explains that such “contact” is crucial to diversity initiatives in education: “[l]earning to interact with others” is part of the impact of diversity and inclusion work (Kerschbaum 79). As a member of neither the LGBTQIA community nor the PRISM group, Sarah

understandably had to leverage her subjecthood as a student, a friend, and a potential advocate.

Becoming a “Consultant-Agent”

Sarah’s overall understanding of herself as subject—an outsider but with a vested interest in group members’ well-being—might have actually made her more care-full throughout the process. But that understanding of self as subject also changed over time. Sarah navigated the composition process first as a student in a class, then almost as a consultant working on behalf of a group, but then again as a consultant-agent trying to position this young group within the wider community. That understanding changed only as she bridged multiple social interactions: having in-person conversations with me, the Writing Center consultant, her classmates, and PRISM group members, as well as her digital communication with PRISM members and online peer response process with writing group members for class. As a heavily social process, composition encourages students to confront their own situatedness: Laura Micciche suggests that embodiment, as seen in Sarah’s shifting sense of subjecthood, is “not static or fixed or predictably available for analysis” (55). In this light, the “fact” of whether Sarah was a member of the group she was serving seems to matter less than the felt experience of membership, pseudomembership, or nonmembership.

Not only did she lack membership in her chosen group, Sarah perceived herself as a relative non-user in her chosen medium. Her lack of experiences with Twitter did not, however, seem to impact her performance in a direct way. During our consultation over her “draft” of the page, she explained, “The tag is ‘Doane_PRISM.’”

I clarified, “The handle.”

“Yeah, the handle. I don’t tweet enough,” she claimed.

In terms of subjecthood, activity theory suggests that past experiences are relevant to the development that can potentially occur through the process of seeking the object. The optimal space within an activity, where growth is most likely, is often referred to as the “zone of proximal development.” Activities happening in this zone are those that plant seeds of learning that later sprout. This concept implies that educational activities should seek objects more complex than what students can already do; instead, learning activities should have time horizons beyond their own discrete limits, such as academic terms and assignment due dates (Engeström “Zone” 36). Likewise, Sarah could have identified her limited knowledge of Twitter’s nomenclature as a sign that she didn’t have enough of a foundation to complete the project well.

Instead, Sarah’s shifting subjecthood meant that she had to be resourceful, paying special attention to where she might find her footing as she made her rhetorical choices. This navigation led to wisdom and awareness, yes, but for many students, confronting one’s setting requires much emotional labor. Faced with the challenge, some choose to disengage from the work, abandon the object for a new one, or become hostile toward the assignment—or the teacher. Especially as a young, female teacher, I wouldn’t have been surprised if the type of uncertainty Sarah experienced had left her feeling frustrated and questioning by what authority I had asked students to take on a project with these stakes. In her particular case, as I’ve mentioned, I wonder if a key difference between students like Sarah and students that find it too difficult to remain in the work was her ability to connect the project to her past and future selves. That is, Sarah’s many images of her

subjecthood may have been key in moving through uncertainty to success: when one subject position became mired, she adopted another in order to keep moving.

Meanwhile, another student, Carson, also found a personal direction for his topic—the lack of adequate funding for the campus trap shooting team, of which he was a member. He drafted a note to send to the Athletic Director to explain the problem and suggest that changes to the budget could better reflect the reality and needs of the growing team. Like Sarah, Carson had identified a specific, local issue: perhaps even more so than Sarah, he had a direct stake in it. He had gotten over the same conceptual hump as Sarah, not understanding the exact product he was expected to compose. He too landed on a genre—a letter or email—with given conventions to guide and anchor him. Activity theory highlights some key differences between the two students’ sense of self, however: throughout the process, despite the personal meaning of the topic and potential benefit he would experience based Carson saw himself mostly as a subject in the activity of the classroom. In his Rhetorical Analysis, he described his project as “something that [I] think could potentially improve” his program, but he spent the remainder of the essay making the case for increasing the program’s budget, repeating the purpose of the Public Text itself; he even included details and facts that had not made it into the Public Text. This oversight may suggest he was more invested as a public agent than I am suggesting, but, as another data point, I offer the entire author’s note he provided for the peer response process: “I basically followed the assignment sheet on what to include. [I’m] not [sure] what else [I] should include.”

I suggest that these two students’ differing sense of subjecthood is key to understanding the difference in their execution and performance in the project. Students

may feel differently constrained or freed by the same setting, for instance. Although both struggled to initially conceptualize the task they were expected to complete, Sarah moved through this moment of tension more smoothly because she had the perspective to recognize the various roles available to her. Carson's topic and seeming involvement in the issue at hand could not have predicted the outcome; although the project necessarily involved him as a subject across at least two levels of activity in the setting of the Doane community, he never consciously or actively moved among those various positions. He delivered more meaning through the texts that came to me, the teacher, than he did for the public audience. He seemed to stay within the activity triangle of the classroom, turning those points of tension into hurdles over which he tripped.

Agency is best understood and distinguished from subordinate phenomena such as self-efficacy by the direction of activity *toward a particular goal*, meaning I must address the "object" of Sarah's activity more deeply: first as a classroom activity working toward a goal and then as a public activity working toward a (related and coordinated) goal.

Object as Classroom Activity

Russell defines "object" as the "raw material or problem space" on which the subject uses tools in "ongoing interaction with another person(s)" (511). As discussed, conversations in writing and in person were her mediating tools and the initial material that helped her work toward her goals, those of the assignment and those for the campus group she'd chosen to focus on. Russell's definition of the object of activity highlights a few key features: the goal is framed as a problem, which is worked upon in a necessarily social way. Because activity theory seeks to describe the dynamic unfolding of activity, Russell notes that objects may be "shaped and changed over time to produce some

outcome”; in fact, “the overall direction of the activity” can even be “contested” (Russell 511). These characteristics help me understand the ways that Sarah came to understand the object of her project, initially as a classroom activity.

Blending purposes and goals can be productive: it makes the social implications of a written product more immediate. And yet, I acknowledge that such a blur can feel confusing to many students. Sarah herself mentioned this type of tradeoff in her reading annotations. She described this tension as she annotated a reading about what makes writing projects meaningful: students “want assistance but independence,” Sarah suggested. While many of the students described this force as a “balance” (of support and choice), I suggest “tension” is more apt. “Balance” suggests a resting state, in which discrete entities have settled into equilibrium and stillness, but “tension” reminds me that even a moment that seems to lack outright conflict might still be full of it. A point of tension is neither necessarily an impasse nor a discrete event, and it’s central to meaningful creation.

Sarah navigated several points of tension in her composing process, even though her object was relatively clear and focused from the outset. Early in brainstorming, Sarah recognized that she wanted to use the Advocacy Project as an opportunity to do something related to PRISM. She explained that “the majority” of her close friends were members of this group or identified as LGBTQIA, though she noted in her interview that she believed that PRISM could “take more steps in being open to the [campus] community.” Specifically, she feared the small group seemed to be “not quite completely established” and lacked a clear presence on campus. She was familiar with the group

because of her friends, but she wondered whether greater visibility could help improve acceptance of LGBTQIA individuals in the campus community.

Shaping this project involves much more than choosing a topic, however. My hope with the structure of the Advocacy Project is that students must recognize their decision-making power and take up the choices available, immediately: to begin drafting, students must settle on not only a topic and rhetorical purpose, but also an intended audience, a medium, and a mode of communication. Rhetorician Wilson Currin Snipes suggests that, technically, all composition processes require this level of *strategic* decision-making. Snipes argues the most foundational choice in the composition process is always one of the first: to Snipes, the writer must begin by recognizing who their goal serves. Is the writing to be for oneself, for understanding, or for influence? He argues that all choices “grow out of this initial decision” (Snipes 152). The Public Text puts writers in this position immediately: action toward a goal can’t necessarily be taken until the spirit of the goal is defined.

In her case, Sarah settled on a goal quite quickly after choosing the PRISM group as her topic or subject. She seemed to struggle with that “initial decision” Snipes describes: it seems her assumption was that the group was in a position to begin to influence the rest of campus, but when she didn’t receive substantive guidance from her friends, she had to come to grips with the idea that perhaps the group didn’t fully understand their current position in the community. Twitter, Sarah reported, seemed an intuitive choice given her goal, and she was able to move on the project once she’d made this decision—“how” to reach her goal became more useful in this moment than “why.” Even if she was unsure of her destination, Twitter gave Sarah a path.

Indeed, Twitter's norms and conventions guided her as she began composing. Sarah did express some anxiety in our first meeting together that her project was "a little different" from her peers', even after I reassured her that other students were composing in social media spaces. Perhaps if no other students had ever worked in such a genre for this project, I as a teacher might have had a different expectation about what could "work" or be an acceptable choice for this project: then I could understand a student's apprehension about bringing a popular, "less academic" platform into their coursework. In other academic situations, students have no doubt faced biases against popular and public media. Fortunately—for Sarah and rhetorical education, I believe—bringing an activity lens to Sarah's process has helped me reflect on the ways that I gauge appropriateness. I define "appropriateness" as relative to the student's identified goal, not the given rules and conventions of the activity level of the typical classroom. I'm concerned with the rhetorical meaning of the choices rather than the narrower, often-contested "academic" meaning of the choices. For instance, I state in my syllabi that, "I'm asking you to complete all work in this class using MLA guidelines (from the Modern Language Association) for formatting, style, and citations. While MLA may not be the style in your academic discipline, it's worthwhile to practice finding and following the rules of an established style" (4). As a teacher in the Advocacy Project, in particular, my concern is whether the chosen medium helps the student achieve their intended outcome for their intended audience—or not. Russell's work with activity theory and genre theory supports my instincts on this issue. A set of conventions is "inappropriate," he writes, only when it "does not work" (Russell 517). The extent to which a student's

choice is “a little different,” as Sarah said, does not factor into my assessment: failing to address the stated problem does.

Within the activity level of my classroom, many students arrive carrying educational experiences in which “nontraditional” genres and media were deemed unacceptable. In terms of genre theory, without experiences of such conventions being repeated, appropriated, and successfully received in classroom settings, students have not always perceived the conventional practices of “writing and sharing things on Twitter,” for example, as an activity that should even occur in the classroom: that is, these activities may be inspired by classroom prompts, but are rarely “operationalized” in a collective way through academic activity. Again, in Sarah’s case, her clarity of purpose seemed to carry through her existing anxiety or doubt about her choice of a “different” approach. Activity theory emphasizes the social nature of working toward an object, so perhaps the social nature of process pedagogy is something that my instructional materials could foreground to students. Without that assurance, some students—particularly those first-year students with less writing experience—may believe that the focus on the public nature of their composition is a “trick.” They may believe the expectations *suggest* they may choose an object that they care about, but that their work will still be judged harshly or unfairly from an academic framework, no matter its effectiveness for the public audience.

To confront the conflicting beliefs and expectations teachers and students may be bringing to a project, the assignment sheet serves as a tool that mediates students’ understanding of a task: while most teachers intend it to communicate and document the terms of the assignment, teachers’ expectations do not convey singular, static, or

necessarily immediate meaning to all students. Flower describes a student's "task representation" as a type of strategic knowledge. A task representation isn't just an ability to repeat back the instructions for a task: it can include awareness about the steps implied in a process, for instance. In my course, I ask students to annotate instructional materials such as the syllabus and assignment sheet because it creates an opportunity for me to check for conceptual understanding.

Although Sarah's early materials did not suggest confusion, she had misinterpreted what part of her project was going to be assessed as an assignment: as I discovered during our individual consultation, she believed the Public Text had to be a one block of content. She had created an entire Twitter account, but she believed her submission for the assignment would be limited to a discrete unit of text: a single tweet. Perhaps in the way that a final version of a paper is the artifact that gets assessed in the end—no matter how many drafts or steps a student might have completed in order to arrive at that product—Sarah believed that she would have to submit just one "version" of her efforts for assessment, no matter what groundwork was necessary to make that tweet possible. Indeed, she literally couldn't produce a tweet for the group until she created and activated their new account.

She came into our individual consultation on her draft with this "task representation" in mind, to use Linda Flower's term. "You built the page," I pointed out. Why shouldn't she receive feedback and credit for that whole series of decisions made? In an activity framework, each decision moved Sarah toward the object and was dependent on the others (growing PRISM's "openness" and presence). Sarah was required to filter each choice through what she knew about the group's preferences, her

own experiences with Twitter, and social opportunities she identified in the actual Twittersverse of campus-related activity in that moment. Each move in that process of navigation contributed to the pursuit of the object. By the end of the consultation with me, Sarah was sighing. This prompted me to ask whether she “felt better” about the project.

“Yes,” she said: “At first I wanted to do the single tweet, and then now that I know I can do the entire thing” she said she felt much better. I encouraged her to embrace the entire account as her text, as a single set of orchestrated activity. As Engeström et al. note, “Talk can be a tool/mediating artifact for boundary crossing, but the use of physical boundary objects/artifacts are often most useful. The absence of talk in conjunction with the use of a physical boundary object can pose ... difficulty in the discourse” (330). Together, the combination of my course materials—such as the assignment sheet—and these interactions helped shape and reshape students’ understanding of the task at hand.

A more experienced writer may feel, somehow, that even work that’s a little “off-track” will still be honored in the final assessment or that their efforts could still matter in their teacher’s esteem for them. In the context of Sarah’s story, however, I must still remember that I shouldn’t dismiss or be too quick to “diagnose” inexperienced writers’ “inability” to juggle multiple options or navigate murky consequences. Students’ educational baggage, as I call it, may be impacting their processes in a variety of ways—and neither teachers nor students may ever be able to identify or articulate what is happening. Instead, I propose that teachers can help students not by diagnosing writing barriers, necessarily, but by helping them see problems at the level of activity networks (rather than within individual triangles). For instance, I was able to bring her attention to

the fact that she literally couldn't have tweeted on behalf of PRISM without first making the account, for instance. Showing her my interest in her efforts as public activity let the student part of her rest a little easier. Activity frameworks provide both map and compass; together, we toggled between the two to find some perspective and room to work.

But why was Sarah able to continue on her own? Given the same doubt, some composition students would stall out and wait for "permission" or clarification on how to proceed. Despite her doubts that the project would not align with my expectations for what makes an appropriate project submission, Sarah demonstrated the ability to suspend those doubts well enough to give herself space to complete a "draft" of the project. The implication of this analysis, in terms of agency, then, seems to hinge on the issue of distance. In other words, Sarah's sense of perspective gave her the confidence to produce without letting the object of the Twitter page as a classroom activity (an assignment) interfere with the rhetorical goals of the project as a public activity. Perhaps this is a benefit of classroom activities that manage to network or coordinate with other activities: when a conflict arises in one system, the subject may be better able to maintain composition momentum by shifting focus to the goals and tools available in another system. In fact, Flower has noted that students who are able to see their work as rhetorical *action* are better able to shift their image of the text toward a more accurate and productive "task representation"—or image of the expected work at hand (Flower "Images" 96). I wonder, further, if part of Sarah's perspective was not just distance from the problem but the angle on the problem: was the power in that she saw the problem as a procedural issue rather than a rhetorical roadblock? The problem didn't actually conflict

with her overall goal; she just might have to coordinate how her overall goal would satisfy my expectations as well.

Because the Twitter page originated as a classroom activity, the assignment sheet—my initial expression of the expectations and the student’s task—acts as a salient and foundational tool. Scholarship from the cognitivist movement suggests that an accurate picture of the task at hand is a precondition for success in composition. Particularly, Flower and others suggest that a student’s task representation was crucial enough that a poor one could stall production, so to speak, or foreclose a successful performance. Although my interest in the cognitivist movement—and in cognitive psychology more generally—inspired me in this study, I was pleased to discover how stories like Sarah’s helped me complicate the role of concepts like a task representation. In Sarah’s case, a “faulty” task representation defied the scholarship’s predictions for production and performance: her uncertainty about the shape of the project provoked some concern for Sarah, but it neither stalled production nor limited the quality of the product.

As a classroom activity, the Advocacy Project reminds me that learning and development are not just cognitive and emotional processes but social processes as well. While the assignment sheet is a useful mediational tool early in the process, the way I try to communicate with students in class and consultations also helps me indicate the level of “trust” they can put in me and the drafts and revisions I ask them to complete. I try to indicate that any ambiguity they sense will likely become clearer *or* will become moot as they and I move through the process together. Sarah’s overreliance on her PRISM friends, however, created a pitfall in the process: in any dynamic social space, much is

out of any one individual's control, as she discovered. Centering her goal on the preferences of the group was not sustainable without satisfactory, useful, or timely input. Sarah posed questions about their vision for the Twitter page over email, casually in person, and during PRISM group member meetings. She both asked open-ended questions and solicited specific feedback about issues like which images to use and what types of phrases to employ in the Twitter page's "bio" section. Sarah encountered more ambivalence than she had imagined she would: sometimes members would simply respond with "I don't know," either because they didn't feel a strong preference or because they felt they were responding as "just" an individual, as a friend. These students may have avoided answering the questions because they feared misrepresenting what others in this group may have wanted. Sarah's interpretation was that since the group was so small but the range of identities so individual, even PRISM's elected leaders were hesitant to speak "for" their whole group. For some students, this might have been a roadblock, an indication that the proposed solution was not going to address the problem—or even that the problem wasn't as much of a problem as originally imagined. Instead, when group members told her, "I don't know," Sarah decided to redirect her energy: she reported in her interview that it was at this point that she had to recalibrate. Instead of relying on her social interactions with others to help her build the page, she thought about what she herself might do if she were to remain as the person in charge of the page. The conventions of the chosen medium of her object picked up the slack when her reference point—current members of the PRISM group—didn't provide her with meaningful direction toward the goal.

It should not come as a shock that Sarah faced this particular tension, though it rattled her as a student with deadlines. In one way, it underscored the object she identified for her activity: if they'd had a more central sense of purpose, the fledgling campus group would've already established a clearer presence on campus (digitally or physically). No matter the impact this text had on this newly-reformed group in its own process of self-discovery, Sarah's project proved to be an opportunity, at the least, for her own growth. Sarah later reflected on this chance to both build on and depart from her personal writing habits and preferences. She wondered aloud during our interview about whether she herself might become more "open" on social media after the project, the way that she imagined PRISM members should. Sarah revealed her own preference for in-person communication—especially given "what happens" with the anonymity and lack of accountability on platforms like Twitter—but also acknowledged the potential power of such platforms. To her, a larger or more obvious presence was the general object, even as this object conflicted with her own inclinations and perception of herself as a rhetor.

I can see now how her proximity to the group, through her friendships, might have helped her recognize that she was on a parallel journey with the group: she perceived that both she and the group were early in the process of coming into a more public and visible presence. "I like my privacy," she said in the interview, but this was just a current snapshot of herself, not necessarily her vision for the future. For many young writers, such a public process of exploration and exposure would carry at least some emotional risk. Although our conversations throughout her process did not explicitly raise the idea of "the stakes," in reviewing the data, its absence feels notable. The "text" Sarah created—an entire Twitter page, for a campus group celebrating

marginalized individuals—was instantly available to a wide public audience. The page was not private: anyone with an internet connection and access to a Twitter account could view the content, and yet she was not a member of either the campus group nor a related community of identities. Fear can be a paralyzing feeling, as many teachers and students have felt and witnessed, and yet the risks of exposing a local group of LGBTQIA students to the wider world via Twitter did not outweigh the potential benefits—in Sarah’s figuring of it. Could it be that her role as a rhetor reaching out from the classroom gave her some emotional distance and therefore “safety” to cross a new barrier?

Other social interactions, as part of the project as a classroom activity, helped Sarah shape the Twitter page more thoughtfully. It was at this point in the process when I asked students to complete a Writing Center session, to review their Public Texts with an undergraduate peer consultant. In her interview, Sarah explained that her consultant was the one who actually prompted her to seriously confront the realities of using Twitter, for the better. For instance, the consultant pointed out, the wider Twitter audience may not be familiar with some of the terms common to members of the LGBTQIA group, and even newcomers to campus who found the group on Twitter would need some basic definitions to be able to join the group’s conversations. This helped Sarah weigh and discard various choices, like *which* terms or potential links to resources to include in the “bio” area. Given the freedom (or lack of structure) from her friends in PRISM, she also realized that the very structure of Twitter was giving her more support than she’d imagined it would. For instance, beyond composing original tweets, she quickly realized that finding relevant pages to follow and retweeting others’ content were also meaningful forms of communication in this sphere. These moves also lessened the pressure she felt to

generate brand new content for a group that felt unsure about its voice and purpose online. Genre, it seems, played an important role. Just as Sarah discovered that I would assess the entire product—and not just any single tweet—in this particular social network, creating original content was only one potentially meaningful rhetorical activity among many.

I did note a relationship in the data between Sarah's perception of how "different" her project was and her perception of how complex her object was. In particular, moving through and beyond her feelings of difference seemed to help her see the rhetorical richness of her goal. Not only did she admittedly feel more relieved when she realized that tweeting as composing was not only common but "acceptable," but she also more deeply appreciated the work she had already done. In her interview, she reflected on the ways that the accounts she followed and the retweets she sent were shaping the group's new identity on Twitter because these choices reflected the group's affiliations with local organizations and events. Sarah explained that she was able to help the group communicate what types of social views members wished to "promote," working from her knowledge of which relevant activities on campus the members were also involved with. That is, the genre allowed her different and more expansive ways of thinking and being, on the group's behalf. She also recognized the ways that community-building—not just content-generating, not just "writing"—was also part of this particular rhetorical process.

She noted this realization in her Rhetorical Analysis, so I understand that Sarah recognized how the project's goals shifted as she enacted them. In the process, I imagine Sarah's vision of connection, friendship, and allyship may have shifted—or may in future

efforts. She found ways to help the PRISM group model what they sought for themselves in the campus community: an integrated, supportive presence. And this rich understanding might have been lost if Sarah had viewed her goals as primarily academic.

Object as Public Activity

From the early stages of the process, Sarah was aimed at making a public impact. Sarah's early brainstorming work in fact showed some ambivalence about how Twitter could help her reach her goal, of making PRISM more "open" and available. "That's too short," she said of the length of a tweet. Before settling on Twitter, she also wondered about how a letter to the editor of the campus newspaper would help PRISM, but there she recognized the audience as even more narrow than what she might find on Twitter, since only people who read that particular printed issue of the newspaper could even access the message. She also considered taking a broader angle on the issue, through a letter to an elected representative. In weighing these options, she decided that with LGBTQIA issues, this route had an even "lower chance of impact" than Twitter: in her brainstorming activity, she wrote that letters to representatives were not likely to result in any responses that "affect [issues] directly." In retrospect, it appears Sarah saw the problem as coming from community and cultural issues: her descriptions of these various choices suggest that Sarah saw awareness and acceptance for PRISM as a social issue more so than a political or legal one.

Once Sarah embraced the Twitter account as a vehicle for community-building (rather than content-generating), she was free to mine available resources in pursuit of this public activity. Sarah used the content from existing accounts for other campus organizations, including the Doane Student Programming Board, Doane Student Media,

and the university's general account. She also created action on PRISM's page by doing "a retweet and a quote [from those other pages] ... just to get the [PRISM] page started." Although such moves could be judged as rather indirect forms of composition, activity theorists understand the meaning of such moves in context: "To understand power in modern social practices," Russell writes, "one must follow the genres, written and otherwise" (524). Russell is not demanding that rhetors employ all conventions within given genre; in fact, given the dynamic nature of any genre, the expectations can be contested at any moment. Instead, he argues that attention to (not compliance with) genre is necessary to "mobilize people and gain power" (Russell 537). I believe Sarah discovered this when she had to abandon the group's preferences as her guide. With the freedom to play and build the page as she saw fit, as a public rhetor, she quickly completed many of the "common sense" next steps.

Once she took action, Sarah seemed to take on a more expansive, more rhetorical, and more social approach to the page. And social media networks are built to prompt people through this process, suggesting "Who to follow" and "Trends for you" that might guide one's activity in the system. Yes, although these features come with tradeoffs and consequences for communities of users, such prompts help organize and galvanize social action. Sarah recognized that following similar pages and resharing relevant material isn't just "normal": it's how a new page gains exposure, builds connection, and gathers power. A Twitter account as a composition can feel less direct and less weighty than other forms, but these seemingly small choices are what shape and texture a presence, an identity, online.

Certain genre moves, like the use of hashtags, also helped Sarah foster public credibility even as she was increasing exposure. Sarah used one tag with local relevance, #DoaneIsLove: the title of the annual event that grew from a campus counter-protest when the Westboro Baptist Church visited town. She also used more widely applicable and celebrated tags, including #sexualityawarenessmonth, establishing an even broader ethos. She said that starting a project “for” others brought a feeling somewhere “between curiosity and—not fear—but curiosity and stress of what’s going to happen.” Sarah very quickly let herself try to imagine what the reasoning of a PRISM group leader might be: after she got started and found she wouldn’t always have the answers she needed, she noted that “from there I had to think about what [other Twitter content] *I* would connect the group to.” She discovered that part of giving a face and voice to the group online was to bring it closer to other, related material.

While Sarah’s navigation seems on the whole smooth, if complex, other students waded through their challenges very differently. Like Sarah, her classmate Carson also started the project lacking some clarity about the shape of the Public Text: in his annotations of the assignment sheet, he marked passages that he thought were describing the “main idea” of the assignment and that listed “parts of the paper,” but his marginal questions consistently interrogated the shape of the Public Text, asking whether the text was something that he would “present?” or if it was a “presentation?” The sheet and his annotations helped me understand Carson’s initial concept of the project, though one other tool that is notably absent from my courses is models: I intentionally do not offer students previously completed or examples of any of the projects. In my experience, my students have used the models as blueprints or outlines, foreclosing much variety across

the class. Although I verbally describe many previous examples for the students, the absence of this tool may contribute to part of the struggle some students face, Sarah and Carson included. Sarah even resisted an available resource: the existing Facebook page for PRISM. Even though she could've used this material as a tool to shape her composition, she did not consciously during the drafting process or unconsciously during the reflective interview or rhetorical analysis process factor the content, approach, or activity of the Facebook page into her creation of the Twitter page.

In this sense, both Sarah and Carson seemed to position themselves as if they were starting from scratch, though they struggled with that task in different ways. The depth they gave the goal at hand seemed to differ most. Lavelle and Guarino suggest that writers who accept that writing work *is* work are the ones who then can then actively choose their tools. They explain, "Deep writing rests on a willingness to engage fully and negotiate the writing task. Reflective revision implies an agentic position, seeing oneself as a maker of meaning, with respect for the powerful role of revision, and an awareness of revision as a tool for reshaping thinking via writing" (302). While Carson was eager to be corrected in his thinking ("We do a presentation?"), Sarah already felt ownership of her process and product ("Here's what I have so far...").

Another of Carson's annotations suggested his potential investment in the project: he highlighted the expectation that students were to "make it personal." As mentioned, Carson decided to shape his project around the issue of the underfunded trap shooting team on campus. Once students have topics or problems in mind, in an in-class activity I ask them to compare the potential benefits and limits of different types of compositions to pursue their goals. I spilled my zippered pouch of dry-erase markers on the front table,

and students used the white boards to create charts weighing various media. In the rows, they listed texts such as letters to representatives, newspaper articles, posters, and social media graphics. This process helped many students reach a tentative plan for the most fitting form for their texts, given their goals and potential audiences. For some, it also highlighted issues with scope: many have trouble weighing genres or modes before the goal or the audience is narrow enough for the scope of the project. How could any genre be “appropriate” when the intended audience is as inconceivable as “everyone in the world needs to know this”?

Carson, noticeably, did not participate. I asked students to claim space on the board with their small writing groups—the groups in which they trade peer feedback—so that they could help each other talk through benefits and limits and fill in their charts. “Grab a marker,” I told everyone. When I realized Carson was just watching his fellow writers work, I asked him what types of texts he was considering. He said he wasn’t sure. “Well, let’s just try any three ideas and work through what might happen,” I told him, gesturing to the markers and the board again. “Go for it.” He picked up a marker but never made it to the board.

I think many teachers would take this moment as a sign of disengagement: especially because this was a male student, I’m aware of the ways that a command from a female teacher presenting as the same race may be perceived as a suggestion. I’m also thinking of the personal, psychological, and dispositional traits that might have led Carson to choose not to participate. Given all that, in a fairly open project like the Public Text, this moment worried me: based on previous experiences with this project, I’ve seen students sabotage themselves when they “stall out” at this stage. As previously

mentioned, Snipes suggests that all choices must “grow out of this initial decision”: what is the writing “for”? (Snipes 152). With his personal involvement with the issue, Carson seemed poised to create a powerful project: his rhetorical action might affect his lived experiences on campus. The tools I offered, however, didn’t seem to be prompting him any closer to his goal.

Students like Sarah and Carson are “free to” pursue a personal object, but many require individualized support to navigate ambiguity and even low self-efficacy. As an opening reading for the Advocacy Project, I asked my students to read, annotate, and discuss a book review of *The Meaningful Writing Project* from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (yes, I’ve claimed that my class is not attempting to create future professionals of my own discipline, but I then ask students to use James M. Lang’s review as a “lens” through which to read the Advocacy Project assignment sheet for the first time). This annotated reading is my attempt to frame their position as an agent in the project: “Here’s an opportunity, now you find the spots where you can bring your choices, engagement, and chances for transfer.” Upon reviewing their annotations, I found that if students flagged any of those three conditions for meaningfulness, it was choice—“agency,” as Eodice, Geller, and Lerner define it, is “the opportunity to pursue subjects one is passionate about or writing relevant to a professional aspiration or future pursuit” (23). In their annotations, students seemed enthusiastic about the issue of agency, which they saw as a freedom to make personally *motivated* choices:

- One student drew an arrow to Lang’s sentence “Give students a say,” and in the margin wrote, “I like this.”

- Another student noted of Lang's lead-in anecdote about a college essay he had kept for many years that it was a "paper he WANTED to do and he was PROUD of it"; this particular student also ended their Rhetorical Analysis noting their pride in their own work.
- One student wrote only one verbal annotation, gesturing at all three conditions for meaningfulness and writing, "This is what we do all the time for our writing projects." When reading his annotations to grade and respond during the semester—as well as after the semester for the purposes of this study—I couldn't help but laugh *and* feel affirmed.

This last annotation made me wonder whether my approach was too heavy-handed: the students had heard me say many times that "I'm a very intentional teacher," and yet I knew the issue of agency was always in question. I heard this tension not only in the prevalence of students' notes and comments on the issue of choice but also in students' language and tone. One of Sarah's peer response group members, in their annotation of the Lang article, underlined this passage: "'Let us pick them,' called out a student. 'If we pick topics we're interested in, we're going to write better papers.'" Next to this, he wrote "DAMN RIGHT." Although I perceived that this student and I had a positive rapport throughout the semester (and I knew that all the projects in class did use student-directed topics), these words struck me as full of desperation and insistence—not simply enthusiasm.

And so, as students seem to crave the freedom to choose—and to choose whether and how to become motivated—how do I account for the difference in Carson and Sarah's processes? Sarah lacked "membership" in her topic, on several levels, setting her

at a distance that might have predicted less engagement throughout the project; Carson, however, was directly impacted by his own topic and yet failed to see the idea through. How might composition teachers create productive tension between structure and freedom, to better support students like Carson *and* students like Sarah?

It's not only the substance of a choice but also the perception of a choice that matters. As Eodice, Geller, and Lerner note in their study, "Faculty were much more likely than students to name an assignment as giving students choice or saying it allowed students room to maneuver. In faculty responses, we also saw *require* and *allow* co-occurring twice as frequently as in students' responses. However, both faculty and students named *required* at a similar rate": there seems to be a potential "sweet spot" in the application of structure and freedom (112). As public, meaningful activity is always social, these students' experiences remind me that the *opportunity* to co-create a personal goal isn't enough to make agency flourish. The object of the activity remains co-created among various subjects; goals are dynamic, emotional, embodied, and must be perceived as a coordinated goal, one that the subject believes *they* can approach and that *will* matter.

Moving through Points of Tension

As Linda Flower suggests, "Some writers treat prompts ... as a relatively simple checklist to be run over"; some expectations may even be viewed like those items on a form that could be marked "not applicable" (Flower *Negotiated Meaning* 213). This may describe Carson's more limited concept of the Advocacy Project, whereas "other students use the prompts not as a checklist but as a heuristic," as Sarah did (Flower *Negotiated Meaning* 213). If cast as heuristic rather than procedural methods, rhetorical choices are freed from the pressure to be "perfect," logical, or optimal, let alone in the first attempt:

they can instead become a means of discovery, bound in service of a temporary, finite, and teacher-prompted (and yes, teacher-assessed) goal. Heuristic framing, then, may be even more productive than language of “opportunities” or “invitations,” as Sarah’s process suggests. Sarah wrote in her Rhetorical Analysis, “The project has allowed for me to push my boundaries and see what I can do beyond myself and beyond looking to the future.” She found a way to act, now, even as she *had* to act to discover what she was in fact doing.

Throughout her process, I watched Sarah navigate three major points of tension: grappling with the concept of a “text” in the context of the assignment, finding momentum as she migrated among various activities and subject positions, and employing some tools while ignoring or discarding others. Other students might have moved through these points of tension differently: although I do not want to cast Sarah as a “model” or “ideal” student, I do admire the way each point of tension became a moment for transformation. What helped Sarah continue to move through the project when other students may have treated these same moments as roadblocks?

How do I keep a self-directed process from turning into an academic guessing game for students? How do I guide students without making them believe my preferences or ideas are more acceptable than their own? As another student noted in their reading annotations, “meaningful writing starts with the teacher and how they set up the assignments.” And yet, as I’ve found, much of the meaning of an assignment—and the student’s rhetorical goal for it—are shaped in process, across the process.

For students without Sarah’s perspective, I wonder how I encourage students to enter this problem space with me. Perhaps if I can get students to get through the early

parts of the process—to “put up with that amount of work,” as Sarah so lovingly put it—I could help students like Carson give themselves more of a chance. Although many choices are strategic and sometimes deterministic, as Snipes suggests, agency may not have to precede action. Brainstorming certainly isn’t the only moment in a project where students might “opt-in” and choose motivation for themselves. Even at the end of the process, I might bring students’ attention to this reality more directly. As it stands, the Rhetorical Analysis prompts students to account for their decision-making process. I realize now, however, that I have been asking students for a retrospective rhetorical narrative, using questions such as “How did I make my decisions to create the Public Text based on the rhetorical situation I was responding to?” I also asked about any specific influences on their process, through questions such as “[H]ow did knowing the history or definition of your cause, its scope or significance (who’s impacted, when, where, why, how, and to what extent?), and the recency or relevance of the cause help you create the text?”

But humans are skilled in imposing order and reason on events after the fact. My Rhetorical Analysis presupposes that students made only intentional, motivated choices, although our shared experiences reveal that is not always the case. Retrospective, process-oriented prompts did not help my students rhetorically analyze their Public Texts, and they certainly have not helped me understand much more about *how* students make choices. I now see the value in rooting students’ analyses in the present moment, prompting them to explain what they notice about the text, now, rather than rationalize “why” they did what they did to create it.

Further, I wonder how writing projects might also be mined after the fact for social relevance: even when students do not begin writing from a place of believing they are connected to or could make an impact in an issue, how might reflection help them come to this sense of agency once they've attempted public, rhetorical work? While students are encouraged to think this way while brainstorming for the project, the Rhetorical Analysis might also be a site for students to make social connections from this project into their imagined future lives and roles. It could be an opportunity for students to place the Public Text as an artifact in a sort of "portfolio" they will craft throughout their lives—both in terms of school activity and public rhetorical action. Sarah's experiences, through the lenses of the three activity triangle points, draw my attention to the importance of her sense of subjecthood as a student as well as within the campus community—as a friend and practicing advocate. Her feelings of agency revolved around issues of personal connection, community-building, and relationships; my expectations were invitations to do work she had wanted to try, and this awareness carried her through her process. Questions remain, however, for those students—like Carson—who seem to lack the level of awareness Sarah brought to the project. In the next chapter, I explore the experiences of their classmate Aaron, whose story helps me investigate the limits of subjecthood: to what extent is awareness a key ingredient for agency?

CHAPTER 3

FILLING A TALL ORDER:

“SORRY ABOUT THAT”

Aaron was eager to make a difference. A first-year, out-of-state student, Aaron came to the institution through an athletic scholarship. He was always at once self-conscious but—disconnected. The champion of both real and humorous “what if?” questions in class, he was quick to participate in discussion and to let me know when he was confused. He seemed to see himself as a novice, even with peers, even in our class of mostly first-year students.

These issues of authority surfaced throughout Aaron’s composition process as well as this analysis. The Advocacy Project proved to be an interesting challenge for him. He used this project as his chance to tackle perhaps the heftiest goal ever undertaken in the dozen or so semesters I’ve run this project: Aaron wanted to “try to save the earth.” He was motivated by what had become a common scene on campus: week after week, his fellow dorm-dwellers hauled plastic bags full of plastic bottles and soda cans toward the recycling bin in the parking lot only to throw them into the dumpster of trash next to it. In this way, Aaron did identify a specific topic, though his articulation of his rhetorical purpose—to save the world—was anything but narrow. His peer response group members in class, including Sarah, applauded his efforts as “a good thing to try.”

For a student who seemed dependent on the social parts of the composition process, Aaron offers an excellent case study for questions of agency. He saw me (as the teacher), his classmates (as peers), and even Writing Center consultants as sources of superior knowledge: he behaved as if he believed our suggestions would always guide

him to the correct and “best” choices to make. He even voiced concerns about others’ preferences for how he made decisions: “Sorry [the draft] is not double-spaced,” he told a Writing Center consultant, “I just can’t type in double-spaced.” And yet, he completed his work, did his “own work,” and seemed to use his personal experiences and values to change something in the world. So what does rhetorical agency mean for a student with such a strong sense that others know what’s best for his work? As Cheryl Geisler observes, “every rhetorical performance enacts and contains a theory of its own agency—of its own possibilities. . . . Here, then agency becomes not a problem to be solved or trouble to be resolved, but a central object of rhetorical inquiry” (Geisler 13). Aaron’s lack of authority or awareness of his own power did not necessarily impair his ability to complete the process, but how did the project impact his sense of himself as a rhetorical agent?

In Somers and Saltz’s 2004 work on Harvard first-year students, they make the compelling case that those students who find success as writers in college “initially accept their status as novices” but then are able to “see in writing *a larger purpose* than fulfilling an assignment” (124, emphasis added). Aaron seemed to have the foundation for success: he remained open to others’ suggestions, the stated expectations and guidance from me, as well as his role as a student. Not all suggestions are created equal, however. In his process Aaron showed little evidence of actively weighing, comparing, or discarding any of the inputs; he showed little indication that he believed feedback could vary in usefulness. I’ll consider Aaron’s project through the two most discrete points of the activity theory triangle: subject and object, with a discussion of the third point (“tools”) as it becomes pertinent within each of the more distinguishable points. Aaron

was an eager first-year student with a clear goal, but these conditions alone don't predict success. Without an intentional process of coordinating others' suggestions with his own motivations, what "larger purpose" might we reasonably expect a student like Aaron to achieve?

Subject

On paper, Aaron seemed to be motivated by a real problem (students throwing recycling in the trash) connected to a "*larger purpose*" (saving the world). Aaron's apologetic deference to others, however, made me wonder about the extent to which a student can make choices without actually "calling the shots." To explore this question, I direct my attention first to the point of the activity triangle known as "subject." A subject is the person whose actions are studied, but more specifically, the subject is the agent who identifies the audience, crafts an intended response, and can "orchestrate" resources in response (Geisler 13). A subject must make a "conscious assessment" of a situation—which Aaron did in his choice of topic and audience—although agentive subjects craft conscious "choices in response to those assessments" (Geisler 13). To further explore Aaron's experiences of agency given the expectations of the project, I must distinguish among his subject identities: who was doing the choosing?

An Agent in Community

Aaron was inspired by observations he made in his everyday life on campus, as a student but also a campus resident. In his particular dorm area, the dumpsters for trash and for recycling were located in the corner of a small parking lot in front of the building, along a sidewalk that led north to the rest of the campus. The three trash dumpsters were large, grimy, and blackened, he said. The recycling dumpster was a nearly identical

shape, though it was painted a bold blue color and had a recycling symbol stenciled in green and white: the three arrows pointed continuously to each other, together forming a looping triangle. Recycling should've been an easy activity for students, given that the resources—the dumpsters—were right there.

To get his audience's attention, Aaron's Public Text took the form of a chalked message on the pavement surrounding the dumpsters (see fig. 2 and fig. 3).



Fig. 2: Aaron's Message. Aaron submitted two images as evidence of him having completed his Public Text, which directed students to the recycling bin in the parking lot outside his residence hall.



Fig. 3: Aaron's Context. Aaron's chalk message spanned the corner of the lot.

The message read "SAVE THE WORLD BY RECYCLING" and featured a drawing of the earth.

"My intended audience was for Doane students," he wrote in the rhetorical analysis. "They are my audience because ... the world is something we all have in common." That is, Aaron saw himself as connected to his audience not because they all shared the campus community and the trash and recycling resources—but because they all shared the world, the whole world. What strikes me here is that although the inspiration for the project was local and immediate, his rhetorical analysis put a great distance between himself and his audience. Rather than describing himself on the level of a fellow community member concerned about the use of the dumpsters, he zoomed out to a literally global scale. How could a student identify such a particular way into an issue

and not leverage their relationship and proximity to the problem? Aaron could've even narrowed his focus by addressing the fact that most of the students in his building were underclass students: most new students living on campus are placed in his building or the one next to it. This knowledge might have helped him strategize his message. Further, as this was *his own community* creating the waste, Aaron chose a problem in which he was complicit. Engeström et al. explain that as the world's systems become more complex, the idea of "master-novice," vertical relationships becomes ever shakier. Instead, complex problems require increasingly "dialogical problem solving," (319). Aaron had an opportunity to create "collective mastery" in his community, transforming himself from "a potential subject" in the community to an active, cooperative subject (Engeström "Zone" 32).

Instead, Aaron's sense of himself as a student first-and-foremost seemed to be more influential on his decisions throughout the composition process. What seemed to guide his orchestration of resources was what he was "allowed" or able to do, in each moment, as a student. For instance, when he was trying to decide the genre or mode for his text, he knew from classroom conversations that he would need to talk to Residence Life officials to learn more about what was possible: I didn't know the protocol for getting a poster approved and hung, let alone where students were permitted to hang posters. He attempted to visit his Community Director, the full-time staff member in his building.

But he couldn't meet with her in time for the next project deadline in our class. "Many may wonder why I chose chalk," he wrote in the Rhetorical Analysis at the end of the project. It was "because Melissa Mossinghoff was not in her office." He instead found

his Community Advisor, Katie, who was the student-leader for people living on his floor. Katie confirmed for Aaron that he would “need to get approval from someone” to hang posters, but she mentioned that she had seen “a lot of chalk on the concrete before, and she believed they did not ask for permission.”

In one sense, Aaron was taking responsibility for his actions: he heeded the rules and norms I’d referenced in class and approached the relative authorities for guidance. For a student in their first year, it makes sense that a subject would need to learn more about the activity setting—the university—before choosing a fitting course of action. Further, as Roth and Lee explain, learning occurs when the subject experiences the “expansion of [their] action possibilities in the pursuit of meaningful objects in activity” (Roth and Lee 198). What typically happens in this project, however, is the opposite: learning about the conventions of the community makes students realize that their movements are more restricted than they’d imagined. Posters have to be *approved*? Because he had approached the Community Advisor as a source of authority on community activity, he also seemed to give as much credence to Katie’s suggestion (chalk) as to her knowledge of the rules (posters have to be approved; chalk doesn’t). Lavelle and Guarino describe this type of composition as “surface writing,” which is “primarily reproductive,” linear, and literal (Lavelle and Guarino 296, 297). The ease with which Aaron pivoted from one idea to the next suggests this level of composition, as opposed to “deep writing,” which is strategic. Put another way, whereas a heuristic provides a way of learning or discovering something for oneself, a surface approach to writing is procedural: surface writing uses “a methods-oriented approach based on

adherence to rules and a minimal amount of involvement” (Lavelle and Guarino 298).

Chalk it was: no rules broken.

“Now I had a plan,” Aaron wrote. In an author’s note for peer response on the rhetorical analysis, he reflected that his rhetorical analysis mainly focused on “how I got the idea of using chalk.” Aaron was owning and accounting for his choices—my goal for them in the Rhetorical Analysis—and yet it was characterized by “reliance on the rules rather than concern for making a meaning or for intentionality” (Lavelle and Guarino 298). Aaron’s performance and product were “correct” in the context of our community’s rules, but development requires some “boundary crossing” (Engeström “Zone” 23). What new terrain was Aaron entering, either in the community or for himself as a community member?

Student Choices

As a student, Aaron was a more active subject. He even volunteered that he’d done a similar project in the past. He told me during our consultation that during his senior of high school, he’d taken a composition course for college credit. The credits hadn’t transferred, hence his being in my course. Aaron said he didn’t remember the topic he’d chosen to advocate for. Here, too, I might surmise that a lack of personal connection kept that project from being a memorable one, but that might be oversimplifying. In our project, where he did express a personal desire to pursue the topic, his studenthood still seemed to guide much of his thinking—and his social position as a fellow student seemed disconnected from his decision-making. While this focus on the self as a student-subject can be a position that helps students complete their academic obligations, it poses a challenge to the type of critical investment necessary to grapple with public issues. Is the

project only a means to some other end? He couldn't remember a topic he'd chosen for himself within the last year. The rhetorical purpose stuck with him, but to what gain?

Again, his student subjecthood weighed heavily on his performance in the project. His interaction with my course materials helps me understand more of his sense of himself as subject, yes, but subject relative to my authority and intentions as teacher. In his annotations of the assignment sheet, for example, he marked my explanation of how students should think about the “shape” or genre of their Public Text, which reads that

[t]he text *can involve* any combination of message elements that fit your rhetorical purpose: these elements *may include* the mode or channel you use to share the text with your intended audience, the conventions or genre of the document, and graphic, visual, or design elements. (“Advocacy Project assignment sheet” 1, emphasis added)

Aaron reacted specifically to my explanation that the message's rhetorical features “may include” the types of elements listed. Reflecting even now, I notice that I had intended this sentence to name for the students what I meant by “message elements”: for all I've read about “task representations,” I gave this list of example features so that students would have concrete ways into the level of detail, care, and attention I was expecting from their strategy. Aaron, however, interpreted my word “may” as a clue to a coded expectation: “may include,” he wrote in his annotation, actually “means it should be in there for the A.” He took my language as an invitation to read more deeply, even though my intention was to be even more forthright and specific. My “may” language was definitional in function, offering details about how students might act on my request, but Aaron read it as some sort of seemingly-optional-but-actually-requested expectation.

Had my reliance on “freedom to” language in expressing choices and expectations backfired here? Other students did not comment in this way: perhaps part of Aaron’s self-conscious tendencies made him more likely to reveal this level of strategic thinking in an activity like annotating the assignment sheet. I read Aaron’s comment at first as skepticism about my intentions, maybe even a lack of trust in me. But upon reflection, Aaron’s comment reveals a set of strategic knowledge mistakenly deployed. This revelation communicates that he is aware that teachers are not always explicit in their expectations—and that there are consequences when those expectations are misread. This analysis makes me reconsider similar moves I make in the assignment sheet, as when I discuss what work students may need to do in preparation for crafting their Public Text:

You *may need to conduct* outside research to learn more about your cause or to find up-to-date information to include in your Public Text (and keep in mind that *if* you use any information that’s not yours and is not common knowledge, you *will need to find* a way to communicate the source of your information to consumers of your text). (“Advocacy Project assignment sheet” 1, emphasis added)

Here, I notice that I may have also been using “may” to waffle on issues that I as the teacher-subject was feeling uncertain about. In various versions of this project, I have required students to find credible, relevant, and timely resources about their topics. I found, however, that too much structure around this piece seemed to cause students to twist the rhetorical purpose away from creating public action and more toward reporting what they learned about their topic. This use of “may” seems to reflect my hesitation but leaves space for students who “may need” to learn more before they are able to decide

how to proceed. Thus, I view my later phrasing of “will need to find a way” as a statement of the consequences for this particular choice: *if* students choose to conduct background research before they begin, *then* they will have to cite those sources when used later. Although my use of “may” could be causing as much confusion as clarity, I wonder now about the power of “if/then”-type statements focused on choices: could they be a more explicit means of communicating expectations? The articulation of expectations affect students disproportionately, and “veiled commands” threaten to create further divides along cultural, racial, and gender lines (Delpit 34).

Beyond reading between the lines “for the A,” Aaron’s other materials suggest he had a workable understanding of my expectations and his available choices. Another way I investigate students’ interpretations is during classroom activities: while the students were seated in small groups, for example, I asked them to mark on their own copy of the assignment sheet where they saw things that seemed “important to [them] as the writer” and “important to me” as the teacher. Although I framed them as subjects in terms of “writer” instead of “student” in this activity, most students still saw me as primarily in terms of my teacher-ness. Aaron marked that the process of choosing the topic was important to him as a writer; for important to me, he marked that the most important things were fitting the message to the features of the rhetorical situation (audience and purpose, in particular) in the Rhetorical Analysis and getting the Public Text *to* its intended audience (actually posting it, sending it, and so on, depending on the mode). While Aaron’s personal motivation focused on the topic, he saw strategic action as my priority: I wonder, then, whether topic choice may be more of a lip service to student agency than I have previously believed. A meaningful topic doesn’t necessarily generate

a meaningful activity. His annotations indicate he saw his performance as still, primarily, being for me as his teacher. This distinction in Aaron's thinking leads me to believe that there may be a disconnect between feelings of ownership in the topic or meaning behind a project and any feelings of ownership on the action or impact associated with that significant topic.

This question of ownership circles back to the role that authority seemed to play in Aaron's process. Although he was often self-conscious, inquisitive, and vocal throughout the process, analyzing his session with a Writing Center consultant showed me the ways that his behavior may have been guided by unvoiced assumptions about authority. Aaron's session lasted 28 minutes, just under the average length of a Writing Center visit. As they read through his draft together, Aaron asked the consultant on four separate occasions whether he should "get rid of" something in the text. Aaron also pushed when the consultant's suggestions were too general to be actionable, as when he asked, "Do you have any other ideas on how I could [do] that, or should I just get rid of [this part of the sentence]?" There seemed to be an instinct to maximize his time with the consultant, to get as much concrete guidance as possible. As the consultant had a pen in their hand from the beginning of the session, what might have been an empowering social interaction instead seemed to fuel codependence: rather than grabbing a second pen, Aaron would ask the consultant to mark on the draft for him. "Could you just make a little note?" he asked the consultant after they offered more than one comment.

I don't hear moments like this as resistance of the work itself: instead, I believe Aaron was deferring to the consultant's authority. Aaron accepted or noted nearly all of the consultant's comments, sometimes seeking reassurance on any ideas he came up with

himself: he could do something “if that’s what you were thinking too?” As with the choice of chalk, this part of the graded writing process rooted Aaron even more deeply in his subjecthood as a student-novice. Unfortunately, seeking the smoothest route doesn’t do students much developmentally: being “disruptive” in activity helps students question the premise of their assignments, get reflexive about their own choices, and find the advantages relative to various paths (Engeström “Zone” 30). Between his apologies and deference, Aaron seemed to want to be anything but disruptive.

From the opening to the closing of the session, the consultant—understandably—focused on the assignment elements. Part of the role of a consultant is as a “cultural informant,” a helper in acquiring strategic knowledge about navigating higher education. And the use of and progress gained with a writing center consultant does not rely on the writer’s self-awareness: Muriel Harris suggests, “Students coming to a writing center do not—most often cannot—say they want to work on invention strategies or sharpen their focus or improve the coherence of a paper. They come in saying that they ‘need help’ or that the paper ‘doesn’t flow’” (36–37). Instead, consultants such as the ones in our campus Writing Center are prepared to approach each session as entering a unique rhetorical situation. As Aaron framed his work as an assignment rather than as a public activity, the consultant moved forward from that cue. The consultant asked about a length requirement or any other of my explicitly stated expectations in the Rhetorical Analysis. On the assignment sheet, I describe the analysis as “an essay (~600 words, using MLA style)” and describe in class as being “in the ballpark of 600 words.” The students are asked to analyze how they made decisions for the Public Text “*based on the rhetorical situation [they were] responding to*” (2, emphasis in original). When the consultant asked

about word count, “I’m at 467 right now,” Aaron told the consultant. “Okay, so you’re close,” they replied.

Aaron was as self-conscious and apologetic with the consultant as he was with me. When Aaron’s conversational wording of a sentence in the draft confused the consultant, Aaron had to confirm what he meant: “That’s what I was [trying to say],” Aaron explained. “My bad. Sorry about that.” The two discussed the difference between the way students might word things in writing versus how we might word them in conversation: “Oh no, it’s good,” the consultant laughed along with Aaron. “Cuz that is kind of how we talk!” The consultant also suggested “it’s probably best to avoid contractions cuz I assume this is like a formal paper, right?” Aaron said, “I’m not sure. I believe so. Let’s treat it as [if] it is.” In Aaron’s conversation with the consultant, I notice the ways that his social interactions continued to shape his understanding of himself as a student: How does a student sound on the page? What does it take to hit a word count? How important is that? These social moments, for better or worse, became part of Aaron’s choices. For the Rhetorical Analysis, at least, this conversation fused the final version with longer sentences and more explicit explanations and wording.

At the close of the session, the consultant skimmed the assignment sheet one last time. Remembering that the purpose of the essay was a rhetorical analysis, they encouraged Aaron to get “into like the logic, emotion, and like the logos, pathos, ethos, to use the Greek terms.”

“Maybe,” Aaron hedged. “I guess we haven’t got there...” he started to say, suggesting either that he and the consultant hadn’t been able to get to that within the half-hour session or that we as a class had not yet covered these issues. In fact, Aristotle’s

traditional rhetorical appeals are a concept that I only briefly discuss early in the course: instead, I favor a rhetorical worldview that focuses on the “rhetorical situation.” As a class, we typically conceive the major attributes of a situation as audience, purpose, and the text itself, in the spirit of *Everything’s an Argument*, a textbook I had taught with some semesters in the past. While Aaron was addressing those attributes, the consultant had identified that the analysis was becoming “stuck in a lot of summary.” As a reminder to Aaron to return to the analysis and push on the rhetorical nature of his Public Text, they wrote a prompt in the margin: “how do [your decisions] function to persuade people?”

Although I never again addressed logos, pathos, or ethos with the class, I was surprised at first to find a discussion of them in his final submission of the Rhetorical Analysis: “I had used three appeals to my audience to reach them,” he wrote, including “ethos, pathos, and logos.” At the time, I felt frustrated. I thought I had given this student so much attention in the process, to help him understand the purpose of each part of the assignment. How had he decided to include these details when I had barely mentioned this framework of rhetorical appeals? After moving through this feeling, I noticed that although I hadn’t necessarily asked for this discussion, it did seem to help Aaron in an unexpected way. Aaron’s discussion of logos made him realize that he hadn’t actually used any of his background research on environmentalism as evidence to support his message or build a specific claim for the audience. He reflected that he did not have “much included” in terms of an appeal to logic: “even though I don’t have a quote” or anything to support the conclusion, “most people know that recycling will help save the world so I hope that convinced them to separate there [sic] recycling and trash.”

Tools and the Shaping of Agency

Having so many artifacts from and windows into this project helped me appreciate how complex and surprising student responses can be. I'm grateful I included students' annotations in particular. In activity theory, many "tools" can be considered mediational: they are materials that through interaction inscribe the "shared expectations among some group(s) of people" (Russell 513). Key tools in Aaron's process included the assignment sheet and drafts of the two parts of the Advocacy Project. In some ways, insisting on students' use of these tools—as in having them annotate the assignment sheet—seemed to go awry in Aaron's case. His overreaching though understandable interpretation of my use of "may" gives me pause. I'm left wondering, however, whether a variety of terms—rather than a variety of definitions—might create more varied access to my expectations. For instance, what if I'd used my language of "message elements" interchangeably with other terms, such as "logos"? Although I don't teach from that term, it still helped Aaron get his thinking to the realm I wanted. Perhaps the assignment sheet is a tool that ought to be continually reshaped as I learn more from my students.

Indeed, Anagnostopoulos writes that such tools function as "boundary objects" for the subjects working together in activity. As teachers and students co-create the meaning of an assignment, tools such as assignment sheets serve as "boundary objects" that help individual subjects come together in pursuit of related or overlapping goals: "Boundary objects can ... coordinate work even when they are used differently and hold different meanings" (139). Activity theory then suggests that a student's understanding need not be identical to a teacher's intention, but the tool can be used as a site of negotiation throughout the process. It's a tool of meaning-making, not meaning-stating.

There are no static tools. So too can a syllabus and other course documents serve as tools for teachers as they try to “articulate, reexamine, and enact existing conceptions and practices more deliberately” (139). Aaron’s process reminds me of the intentionality needed for such negotiation from the moment I share each of these tools with students.

This use of tools recalls Sarah’s experience, as she also had to navigate some uncertainty as to what her Public Text “should be.” Both students seemed to find a focus that directed their decision-making. For Sarah, it was her object or goal plus the conventions of her genre that guided her. For Aaron, however, it seemed to be external sources of authority. While both writers found an ease and were seemingly carried along by some self-discovered momentum, a key difference seems to be in the subject position. Sarah’s drive was rooted in her role as a public rhetor; Aaron’s drive was rooted in his role as a student performer. Put another way, the activity for Sarah seemed to be actively directed while Aaron’s seemed passively directed. For instance, Aaron’s Public Text took on more meaning as it took shape because of the medium of communication—chalk on the ground for an environmental issue? it’s a savvy move—but does that mean it was a rhetorically agentive decision?

Aaron may not have been aware of the power of his choices because of his focus on the assignment elements and the teacher as the audience, but he still found meaning in the process. Activity theory suggests that subjects only grow from their activities under certain conditions: Engeström writes that teaching and learning approach the potential for growth “only when they aim at developing historically *new forms of activity*, not just at letting the learners acquire the societally existing or dominant forms as something individually new” (Engeström “Zone” 39). Here, he suggests that appropriating or

employing existing methods are no more than rote learning: they reify existing forms of rhetorical action. While this public activity may have an impact societally—more students may recycle their recyclables—it does not necessarily result in development in the learner.

Object

“I wanted to make an impact ... on the environment because I had never really tried to help the environment,” Aaron wrote in his rhetorical analysis: “I thought this would be good place to start.”

This “place to start” is one way of thinking about the “object” of the activity, which Russell defines as the “*raw material* or problem space” with which the subject interacts. In Aaron’s case, the problem space was a literal one, found at the corner of a campus parking lot. How he behaved in this space, however, was something he needed to decide. Russell notes that the “overall direction” of an activity can be “contested” throughout the process (511). As I quickly noticed in his process, Aaron did not necessarily move as I would have expected through this problem space. The exigency offered him a local version of a very large global problem: Aaron “had been seeing recyclables in the trash and trash in the recycling,” he explained in his rhetorical analysis. He knew his initial intention. “I wanted it to make it look and sound almost like and S.O.S. call,” he wrote.

An Agent’s Relationships—to the Audience and to the Goal

Aaron focused on the audience’s experience throughout the composition process as well as the reflection afterward. He explained in his rhetorical analysis that he “chose to write each letter in different colors and try to make them bold and stand out to grab the

eye[']s attention more than just white chalk or a single color.” In fact, in analysis, it became clear to me that Aaron’s project was very much driven by social forces. Activity theory suggests that all “cognition and behavior, including writing,” can be traced back to “to social interaction” (Russell 509). While activity theory does not attribute all behavior to some sort of underlying concept or structure, the theories do suggest behavior is mediated as part of “mutual exchange and negotiation” (Russell 509). As rhetorically-oriented writing teachers well know, imagined audience can impact how a student makes choices throughout their process. Aaron was at once grounded by—pun intended—and perhaps lost focus in his problem space and implicated audience.

Aaron’s rhetorical awareness complicates my thinking about agency. Geisler notes that critiques of “the ideology of [student] agency” take issue with “the link between this rhetorical action and social change—in what sense can the actions of a rhetor be linked to consequences in the world” (12). Perhaps as this was Aaron’s first effort to advocate for an environmental issue, he was resistant to or unaware of what a prime opportunity he had. Indeed, Geisler suggests that to pursue rhetorical action is “to take the risk of directly confronting our irrelevance” (Geisler 12). Did Aaron have any reason to fear his own power—or potential “failure”? Although the message directly confronted his peers, the audience could not have known it was a peer speaking to them. What does his distance or absence from the message suggest about Aaron’s sense of agency? Lavelle and Guarino note that “personal involvement” is “key to acquiring writing skills,” but research in composition pedagogy must also consider emotion and intention—not just cognitive involvement (302). Aaron made choices, but to what extent did he believe that *he* had the power and position to effect change?

Despite his procedural approach to the process, Aaron actually completed much of the project in a more haphazard way than I coach students to proceed. After some initial brainstorming in class about topics, interests, and potential genres or modes of communication, I began meeting with the students individually: they were expected to bring a first draft or sketch of their proposed Public Text. When Aaron came to meet with me, what he brought instead of a draft of his message was a draft of what was more like a research paper about various recycling and environmental topics, which may have been a default toward previous experiences and previous teachers' expectations.

At this moment, I was more concerned about his progress and comprehension in terms of the Public Text as a classroom activity: in class he had seemed to understand the goal of the Public Text. It was “the thing that does the thing,” as I often say as rhetorical shorthand, and the Rhetorical Analysis might include more evidence and research as it’s “an assessment of how you did the thing.” I tried to explain again what the “draft” for that meeting should’ve been.

“Oh, like a *picture* of the sign?” he asked to clarify.

“Yeah, it’s a draft of the sign, [of] what you’re going to make.”

“Oh, I brought you the wrong thing then. My bad,” he said quickly.

“That’s okay. So let’s go through this.”

“That’s just kind of the way my brain is like functioning around this.”

“This is all stuff you should have been doing in your head anyway to do the thing, so it’s not like...”

“A waste-waste?” he asked.

“Yeah, no no no.”

“I got you now,” he said.

“So it could be a lot of this is on the right track still,” I suggested.

He’d somewhat blended the ideas of the Public Text and the Rhetorical Analysis: he thought this “draft” was meant to explain what he wanted to do and how in the public text, so what he’d done was compile evidence about environmental issues and how trash and recycling behaviors impact them. He’d also found examples of strategies others had used to draw attention to recycling efforts, as sort of inspiration for himself. As Aaron explained what he’d created so far, I recognized that this type of moment was not uncommon. Fairly often students include unused or discarded evidence in their rhetorical analysis to show what they had navigated as they built what *became* their argument in the Public Text.

Once we broached that faulty task representation, we were able to shift our attention from the goals of the classroom activity (understanding the parts of the assignment conceptually) to that of the public activity: what would this text achieve, and how? He initially described his text as “a sign” he would place somewhere on or near the dumpsters. This was logical enough, so I nudged him to get a more concrete vision. “How will it actually be put on the thing in a way that it won’t just, you know, wash away with the rain or...?” I asked.

“We stick it to the dumpster in a way that it’ll stay or stick it to the ground next to the dumpster,” he suggested as he started thinking out loud.

“And do you know who you’re going to talk to to get permission to put these signs up?” I pursued, trying to help Aaron see what types of steps he might need to take as he decided on a shape for his text. I also wanted to help “troubleshoot” the logistics, I

told him: I wanted to be sure he gave some thought to any physical and conventional limitations. In reflection, I notice that moments like this reveal my preferences as a teacher: I would rather have students become frustrated in more productive ways than “I couldn’t find a type of tape that would stay on the dumpster,” as an example.

Toggling between the goals of the assignment as a classroom activity and as a public activity can happen productively, even when the students and I don’t notice that we’re making these cognitive shifts in conversation. And the shifts are necessary, as both “levels” of activity are coordinated with each other. Toggling allows the students and me to negotiate how various sets of rules, across the university setting, apply and intersect in this assignment. It’s difficult to talk about issues like the logistics of printing and hanging a poster on campus without being clear that our roles as community members are most salient in that moment, though as a teacher, I don’t necessarily “care” if students breach protocol or permissions needed to hang posters on campus: I don’t grade based on these criteria. As a fellow community member, however, I do care. I want to help my students navigate our campus as active, responsible members, and I can model the type of public behavior I would encourage. Pursuing our classroom goal, the assignment, is not more “important” than adhering to community conventions and vice versa. In this way, students and I must navigate potentially conflicting goals as we toggle between the object of the public text as a classroom assignment and the object of the public text as a public activity.

Priorities, Practice, and Perspective

Navigating the rules and tools of a setting, such as our university, requires attention to the variety of options available. The context itself can help a subject

eliminate options or point to particularly effective approaches, given the setting. Since Aaron had settled on a literal problem space, in Aaron's case, it made more sense to me to work through possible forms or genre *before* talking about the content of the message itself. Again, the physical reality may have limited what shape the message could even take. This is one of the issues that makes teaching the Advocacy Project both exciting and draining: depending on their topic and approach, each student might require an individualized set of deadlines and order of operations. Although Aaron had never had the occasion to chalk a message on campus before, he knew that student organizations sometimes did it—as a way to celebrate holidays or to announce events such as Doane's Relay for Life for the American Cancer Society. Once he had chosen chalk as his medium or “tool” with which to act, some of his composition choices seemed to become automatic. Russell explains that “as an individual appropriates (learns to use) the ways with words of others, they may (or may not) also appropriate the object/motive, and subjectivity (identity) of the collective, of a new activity” setting (Russell 516). Although the other two projects in our class had required more “traditional” academic arguments, analysis, and presentation in the form of MLA-style typed essays, this project relied more on the fit between the message and medium. It's something I emphasized often. “How will you know that a poster is the most effective text before you know what your point is?” I ask the students often, early in the process.

In this situation, however, perhaps this way of thinking contributed to Aaron's oversights. It may have been easy enough to abandon the ideas about evidence, “proof,” or persuasion we'd considered in the other projects, given this project was not a “paper” the way the others were. As his teacher, I seemed to prioritize procedural issues, although

my intent was to help him focus and spring to action, keep him “on track.” I’m not suggesting that Aaron might have created a more effective text if only the content would’ve better warranted its one and only claim (that recycling helps “SAVE THE WORLD”). After all, the impact on the actual audience isn’t something I attempt to measure or assess: instead, success depends on how effectively students identified the problem and audience then how effectively they responded to that situation. Students choose their object or goal so that they may “practice” rhetorical action, in a meaningful way. The outcome is beyond their control, as it lies with the audience. Compared to Aaron, his classmate Sarah was able to use the procedural features of her chosen medium of Twitter—such as “Who to follow” links as well as retweets from similar accounts—to expand her sense of the overall goal of the account. She allowed the available tools to shape her existing goal for the activity: Aaron allowed the available tools to *direct* his existing goal.

More attention to the available tools might have helped Aaron more actively identify and weigh existing options. At no time in the process did Aaron identify or reflect on the fact that his choice of chalking his message was perhaps a very savvy decision given its argument. How appropriate that an environmentally-aware message did not itself directly require a pile of materials or create excessive trash? On a campus that claims to be committed to recycling initiatives, our students print a lot of materials related to recycling: a recent Student Congress recycling campaign called “WHY I RECYCLE” included a dozen different printed flyers that were copied and posted in most buildings around campus: each pictured a current student and a paragraph explaining

their personal commitment to recycling. None of posters included details about the recycling services available on campus.

Aaron's project reminds me that an opportunity to make a choice does not an agent make. Part of my object in this activity is for students to have a chance to take up a mantle as rhetorical agents and to "practice" a real composition process in a supported way, but I'm realizing that students need to be aware that this is what is happening in the project. I'm trying to help students learn more about the strategic knowledge of how to interact with an issue and less about the content knowledge they may acquire as they create their Public Text. Further, I'm realizing that students need to be more explicitly invited to use personal knowledge as a tool for pursuing their goal—without obligating students to take on particular risks or forms of disclosure. Personal knowledge, Herrington and Curtis write, is "where not just [students'] principal interests but also their primary stores of knowledge, and therefore authority, lie" (Herrington and Curtis 4). Aaron had personal knowledge of and relationships with the people perpetuating the problem. While he did the work and, I believe, completed each part of the project to the best of his ability, it's not clear what gains Aaron made as an agent. If Aaron doesn't know what he knows, is he gaining any authority as a budding environmental activist or rhetor? If he doesn't know what he did, how can he plan what he might do in the future? Engeström notes that activity is "regressive" when it merely reproduces or reenacts a discovery: "Life moves in circles, not in an ascending spiral" ("Zone" 36). As shown in Aaron's project, power wielded accidentally may help reach short-term goals but may not translate to long-term development.

Activity toward a goal is always both social and felt. Much of Aaron's observed and reported experiences revolved around what he thought I expected and what he felt he owed me. As an example, Aaron expressed concern when he had to miss class on the day I collected the first graded assignment for the project, even though he was on a school-sponsored trip: an excused absence, by the university's definition. When he arrived for his individual session with me, he launched into an explanation about the missing work. As he dug through loose pages his backpack to retrieve the assignment, he explained, "I'm sorry, I had a binder explode up on me."

"Good thing the semester's almost over," I said with a laugh.

"I'm very very sorry."

"It's okay," I said.

"It fell off the top of my desk. I swear I did it," he laughed as he finally found the papers to turn in. "Sorry about that."

"That's okay."

"Thanks for helping me out here," he said (as if having to miss class for an excused absence were a problem to solve). "You're the best at helping students with that."

"Hey, life happens, binders explode," I said to keep the mood light and the consultation moving.

Considering Aaron's process as a whole, I'm struck by the image of the binder falling and popping free in a flurry of paper. Paper—a ready recyclable. The frenzy implied in such a mess also captures the frenetic energy that sometimes accompanies these projects. Students are navigating multiple new roles and identities at once; I as the

teacher must toggle among levels of thinking and networks of activity and help the students understand the distinctions as well as the blurry boundaries. His goals in the project were arguably “his own,” but as I discuss, his subject positions shaped the creation and navigation of these goals. Aaron was “expanding [his] involvements with activity systems,” as he became not only a resident who used the dumpsters and a student who walked those routes but also now a *community* member who advocated for the dumpsters’ appropriate uses (Russell 516). That literal space, the “problem space” that inspired his object shaped how his various identities would be implicated.

“Thank you for that help.”

Aaron’s tone wasn’t always apologetic: it was equally as often a tone of gratitude. In his annotations of the syllabus, he wrote “thank you” in the margin next to my policy about arranging extended deadlines for extreme circumstances during the semester. After one suggestion from the Writing Center consultant, Aaron nearly cut them off to say, “Perfect, yeah. I agree with that. Thank you for that help.” And yet even this praise seemed to reinforce his deference to others as authorities. He saw his role as one rooted in his activity as a student completing an assignment—with a side order of personal exploration into empowerment and impact. He seemed critical of his own performance only in light of the assignment expectations; he seemed to resist or ignore chances to question the impact of his local action. Or, perhaps, he assumed that the impact was beyond questioning. If Aaron shrugged off the potential of a class project to actually “help save the world,” what meaning was he taking from the process? Further, is there something about the scope of his project that might be instructive to projects like this in the future?

Although Aaron's composition process stayed on the level of "surface writing," Aaron did act as if his words could matter. He never articulated the specific impact he thought recycling would have on "saving the world," but even given that leap, it seemed that Aaron behaved as if he believed small, local actions could affect global goals. I wonder, though, to what extent I ought to help students like Aaron recognize and confront such leaps. Intentionality may be a little overrated in composition pedagogy as compared to awareness: paired with awareness gained *ex post facto*, couldn't unintentional actions still create meaningful learning?

In Linda Flower's cognitivist work *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning*, she suggests, "The tangled webs of feeling, thinking, and social action [students] constructed did not become untangled. But with awareness seemed to come a sense of options and the opportunity to mediate both context and feelings to translate understanding into action" (Flower 251). Aaron's process suggests the potential of the inverse, that we might be able to translate action into understanding. Activity theorists note the distinction I'm employing here: agentive behavior and development occur only from "a transformation of actions" *into* activity (Engeström "Zone" 41).

Marilyn M. Cooper suggests that agency is a "a matter of action," although she argues "it involves doing things intentionally and voluntarily" (Cooper 439). Agency may be a capacity students are learning alongside and coordinated with the activity of composing. Indeed, by the end of the process, Aaron was reporting felt agency. Aaron sounded hopeful about how he'd approached his goal: "Overall the change that I hope to have created is that I hope by doing this I have motivated more people to recycle," he wrote in his Rhetorical Analysis. His call to fellow students to help "SAVE THE

WORLD” was a chance for him to adopt the posture of an environmentalist, a position that allowed him to act even without entirely disrupting his life or lifestyle in pursuit of a big goal. He also wrote, "After finishing the project I feel like I had made up for not helping in the past," and "I still want to continue to help the environment because it is a problem." His tone suggests candid sense of himself as an agent taking a tentative step, making a late but fresh start toward action. It's hard to deny the shift Aaron *felt* as an agent, even if his work does not articulate all the connections that led him to those feelings in the linear or logical way we might expect from the product of a “polished” classroom activity. Instead, disregarding the actual impact of students’ action may have opened space for students to prioritize their own experience, to play with scope, scale, and medium—even if some students will still cling to student “performances,” decoding expectations and offering cues to the teacher that they believe are expected in return. As students grow as rhetorical agents, perhaps experience and navigating academic hurdles may still shape future thinking. Although Aaron did not seem to recognize what potential success his message had, he insisted in his analysis that “if we take care of the earth it will take care of us.”

This slogan is common in the rhetoric surrounding environmental causes; it draws the audience’s attention to the quality of not just the earth but humans relationship with it. What does it mean that Aaron co-opted such phrasing for his message, perhaps unconsciously? He is seemingly “borrowing” the language of an activist as well as the medium of other student-activists to craft his point. For both the public audience and me as his classroom audience, Aaron seems to be practicing this new role rather than embodying it. In his essay “Inventing the University,” Bartholomae explains that students

enter the academy by trying on the language they consume: “To speak with authority student writers have not only to speak in another’s voice but through another’s code ... with power and wisdom” (413). While his choices may have been unconscious or may have seemed somewhat shallow or simplistic, Bartholomae’s work reminds me that Aaron’s process might just be prototypical: he is embracing a short, small, targeted project to get a feeling for a type of expression. Isn’t that what I was hoping students would do?

Aaron cared about the topic, but his “involvement” in the issue was shallow. The exigency, audience, and message medium were sufficiently clear, specific, and narrow, and they all supported his larger, more vague intentions. The leap or disconnect in his specific role as the subject bearing the message, however, has me wondering about what “success” means in the Advocacy Project. Despite the lack of a logical claim or a stated warrant in his message, Aaron’s chalk message may have had an “impact”: perhaps students changed their behaviors or at least thought differently about them as a result of the message. I do not assess students’ work for the audience’s response, however: to try to measure rhetorical “success” of each Public Text would require a more complex process than the five to six weeks I typically schedule for the Advocacy Project. Based on my analysis of Aaron’s decision-making process and my concerns about the limits of rhetorical agency, I now question the role that perceived “success” or “impact” plays in this learning experience. While an “impact” could still result from an “unsuccessful” project, a “successful” project would almost necessarily produce an “impact.” Agentive behaviors, Cooper argues, must be intentional, “but it is not a matter of causing whatever happened” (439). The subject’s thinking and action toward that thinking is what defines

agency; the outcome or result is irrelevant. Agentive behavior may have no effect outside the individual taking action; non-agentive behavior may have a tremendous effect and no effect on the individual's sense of their own power. Impact, then, seems to be about *societal* development, the extent to which this individual activity changes a "societal practice," but I believe success in the Advocacy Project is marked by an individual's strategy and/or awareness of their navigation toward that impact (Engeström "Zone" 33). That navigation presupposes conflict, since a problem is by definition a conflict. In Aaron's case, even his framing of the problem only required limited involvement: recycling is an obvious, easy, and beneficial way to help "save the world." If it were that obvious, easy, and beneficial, though, why weren't students doing it? Not only did Aaron avoid any disruptive behaviors throughout the social interactions in this process, he also seemed to resist making the problem any more involved than he first assessed it to be.

Here at the end of the analysis, I feel called to return to the beginning of the project: how I articulate my own expectations for the Advocacy Project. Given what I'm learning from Aaron's process, how should I articulate my vision and values to students? How might even unintentional choices be mined for awareness after the fact, so that they might still result in learning? If conflict, problem-solving, and scope management are so important to learning and development, how do I make them more foundational in the process I lead students through? Aaron himself was confused about the order of stages in the composition process, as I structured them: that order affected his understanding of what the Public Text and Rhetorical Analysis each "did." Perhaps the checkpoints of the process could better reflect the more recursive, sometimes individualized process that's typically needed in this project.

The maxim “fake it till you make it” comes to mind as well: Aaron took action until he had completed the project, and the topic, audience, and message could’ve been very effective if executed with more strategy. However, where is there room for “fake it till you feel it” in rhetorical education? Aaron took action but was not agentive, so how might agency be learned through prompted experience? I fear without addressing these questions, the Advocacy Project may continue to foster single shots at rhetorical action (impact) without enough opportunities to foster students’ ongoing growth and development as rhetorical agents (success). Our institution, like many others, does attempt to offer students cohesive educational experiences: the Liberal Arts Seminar series, for example, is required curriculum that spans three lightly-linked courses and learning outcomes across students’ four years. There may be missed opportunities, however, in building smaller bridges, such as among popular courses like English 101 and typical sophomore-level courses across the disciplines.

Indeed, if students like Aaron are going to repeatedly defer or take cues from sources of external authority when presented with decisions to make, it’s critical composition teachers regularly review their coursework for unexamined expectations. These teachers have a unique opportunity to start students on a journey from practicing agency to acting as agents. They should also talk with students and invite processes such as annotating to seek greater understanding. Aaron’s process illustrates what others have found, the ways that even “savvy” or strategic knowledge can be overgeneralized to the point of a total misinterpretation of an expectation. The social co-creation of goals and tools blurs and remakes the original expectation: meaning is confused through teachers’ and students’ joint navigation of “tasks and criteria” (Thaiss and Zawacki 60). Thaiss and

Zawacki suggest that a teacher's standards may develop consciously *and* unconsciously through activity in five "contexts": "the academic," "the disciplinary," "the subdisciplinary," "the local or institutional," and "the idiosyncratic or personal" (60). Our self-awareness for our subject position, then, may help us identify unarticulated assumptions or values—such as my blurred distinction between what "impact" and "success" mean for assessment as well as my realization about the extent to which the order of action and reflection matter. And yet, the standards of "academic writing" must be interpreted by our live, changing audiences: the students. Just as I tell my students, no amount of preparation will result in a "perfect" text, and no particular audience impact or response can be guaranteed.

Perhaps Aaron might have drawn or discovered more connections and awareness through the Rhetorical Analysis if he hadn't focused (or been directed to focus?) as much on the literal decisions that led to his text. He became oriented to the parts of his process rather than his progress: he focused on how he made choices around his limits and the restrictions of the community rather than his potential as an agent in that community. My intention to go deeper into rhetorical agency was misplaced, maybe: I was working on the assumption that framing rhetorical action as a decision-making process would enhance the opportunities for building rhetorical agency in one set of experiences. Instead, this analysis has revealed useful moments where my thinking, expectations, and teaching materials may be taking this intention off-course. I'm not without hope, however, as Aaron's process opens possibilities about "faking it till you feel it," even if this project is just one moment in a long process of practicing agency into felt reality. As I knew

coming into this work, the presence of a choice does not an agent make, and Aaron's process has challenged me to revisit my own choices.

CHAPTER 4

VOICE AND VOICES:

“HOW DOES THIS SOUND?”

Jordan was in for a surprise. By the spring semester that year, he was feeling more confident as a student in rigorous courses in engineering. Jordan was also navigating a travel and practice schedule as a member of the golf team. Then he found out about the tuition hike. Student media covered the annual increase to tuition, and many young students realized for the first time that much of their existing aid would remain unchanged. Jordan’s academic scholarships would cover the same amount—not the same proportion—of his tuition, fees, and room and board for his next year and beyond.

Like his classmate Aaron, Jordan now found himself in the center of a problem, a broad issue with local implications: the rising cost of education is a vast and complicated topic. Jordan was pained, however, by one particular part of the issue, that students were expected to stomach tuition and costs rising by a certain percentage each year while institutionally-funded scholarships remained static. Because funding differs so much from school to school, Jordan decided to respond specifically to Doane’s practices regarding scholarships. In the author’s note that accompanied a draft for his peer response group, he explained that he was “trying to write a letter about academic scholarships ... asking [the school why] they do not accommodate for efforts achieved in college” and proposing “some other ways to go about it.” Although his Public Text was a critique of authority, Jordan took responsibility for his work: he expressed concern throughout the semester about how others perceived him. In the first assignment in the course—the syllabus annotation—Jordan paraphrased my opening greeting about engagement with

the comments “act respectfully” and “be cordial.” His standards for himself seemed clear in his self-talk throughout the annotations, as when he encouraged himself to “get help” from the student resources listed in the syllabus as needed or when he paraphrased my expectations for how students should conduct themselves during class as “don’t be dumb.”

Thinking of these comments now, I notice the care and effort that characterized much of Jordan’s process, as a student in general but also as a rhetor. Jordan came into this project with similar identity markers that Aaron did: presenting male, early in his college career, presenting white, student-athlete. Without clear factors distinguishing the young men, Jordan seemed to leverage his position as a student among many to greater effect than Aaron did. Further, his goal also made Jordan’s process more complicated than those of the students examined thus far, because the two types of activity in the project—one for class and one for a public—had the most overlap. He still wore his “student” hat in the “public” activity. In fact, his identity as a current student was part of his logic, argument, and ethos in the Public Text. And yet, toggling between the two levels of activity revealed interesting tension for Jordan. Particularly, it became clear that although he was quite concerned with his ability to “sound formal” enough, Jordan’s inspiration for the topic was personal and emotional.

This tension emerged in different ways across the process, and Jordan wasn’t always able to identify it. In his author’s note with the draft to peers, I hear the tension as he struggled to describe his progress in the draft so far: “I think [I] have started getting a personal view point [sic] on the issue well, but need to still get a wider view.” Although he could not articulate what he meant by “a wider view” (relevance? audience

awareness? cohesion?), Jordan's process showed that he was often consciously considering how his subject positions and text would be perceived. Even in the Rhetorical Analysis, meant to focus on me as the teacher as the primary audience, Jordan told his peers, "I would like to know if it is sounding rhetorical enough, and if I am getting the purpose of the rhetorical analysis right." This focus on his student subjectivity may suggest a narrow perception of the purpose of the exercise, but based on his performance throughout the project, I believe it highlights Jordan's awareness and sensitivity to each level of activity.

And yet Jordan kept his "student hat" on throughout the project as a classroom activity *and* a public activity. The proximity of his two student subject positions makes his use of tools all the more interesting. Not only did Jordan's meta-work reveal that he was conscious of his positionality, but he also employed moves and materials to create intertextual and genre-bending arguments—to his audience outside the classroom but also in the analysis submitted to me. In his message to the university about changing financial aid practices, he quoted a brochure used by the Admissions Office; in his analysis, he cited both a planning email from my assignment sheet and me as reference points. Using activity theory as a lens, it becomes obvious quickly which tools were useful to Jordan as an agent, "revealing the social and material resources ... salient in activity" (Roth and Lee 197). His project is exciting through this lens, as Engeström et al. note that it is growing "experts" who most readily "face the challenge of negotiating and combining ingredients from different contexts to achieve hybrid solutions" (319).

Because of his topic and the various student subjectivities Jordan employed in this project, it is essential to consider the implications of his process for student agency in

rhetorical composition. As David R. Russell notes, intertextual analysis affords “students, teachers, and curriculum reformers” the ability to learn more about how genres are used in networked activities; only then can community members reconsider where rhetorical moves are taught and learned in order to best “mobilize people and gain power” (Russell 537). As a teacher of many first-year students, I am inspired by Jordan’s experiences and strategies. In particular, the tensions among his conscious subject positions, his use of “traditional” academic moves, and his desire to “sound” a particular way generate new questions for me for student agency. How do students imagine the connections (or disconnections?) among their various positionalities? Where do students imagine opportunities to leverage one subject position in service of another? And how do they sense the risks and possibilities?

Subject

“Effort” was a big deal for Jordan. As he wrote in his Rhetorical Analysis, the project taught him that in “nearly ever[y] issue,” if enough people “just try” then improvement is possible. As I’m interested in Jordan’s developing sense of agency, I turn first to the point of the “activity triangle” often referred to as “subject.” In activity theory, the subject is simply the subject of analysis: “the agent(s) whose behavior” is being studied (Russell 510). Preceding agency is an “opportunity to pursue” something of value to the individual, relevant in composition studies in general and the Advocacy Project in particular (Eodice, Geller, and Lerner 23).

Positioning Oneself in Community

Jordan’s topic held personal and literal value for him. Although much of his composition process focused on how he would “sound” in his texts, Jordan’s motivation

ran deeper than this focus suggests: issues about community and communication surfaced throughout his process. As a student, Jordan wanted to take a moment of personal disappointment and transform it into an opportunity to seek a more just system. Indeed, he did seem to sense that he was an agent within an existing structure. In his author's note on the Rhetorical Analysis, he explained to his peers that he was trying to describe "why I wanted to just send [my argument] to a higher up." This hierarchical language might suggest Jordan saw himself as subject to institutional authority, but he was also directing his message straight to that "higher up." "I would like to propose a change in the way academic scholarships work for returning students," he wrote. His language presumes his is a voice to be heard, that he is "allowed" to propose a change at all. I'm also drawn to the way his diction privileges movement and mobility: he uses the phrase "returning students," where (in my experience) many students his age are more likely to say "upperclassmen." Though subtle (and possibly unconscious), the word "returning" also supports his perception of ongoing membership in a community—a savvy choice given his audience, who of course are interested in retaining students beyond their initial commitment to Doane. Through even these small choices, Jordan's language reflected his position within the institutional community as one that was subordinate but also interdependent with those of authority.

Further, Jordan's approach seemed to position himself as an agent with the potential to contribute to change. In rhetorical education, and most academic genres, utterances do not occur in vacuums, and Jordan framed his text as if it were a response in an existing dialogue: "I believe a fair counter to the ever increasing price [for an education] would be to increase scholarship amounts." Jordan's topic was inherently an

economic one, and this reality is reflected in some of his language: some phrases could also appear in the transcript of a business negotiation. Even so, words like “counter” thrill me as an educator, as they suggest Jordan was behaving as if he already had power. The system may have been flawed, but he saw himself as part of shaping that system.

Jordan was also not afraid to emphasize his student role: as he explained in the letter, “When I applied to this university I loved the scenery and the small community, but what I liked the most was that I was given more scholarships here [than] most of the other places I applied to. It made it possible to attend such a high priced private school.” (His call should sound familiar as we find ourselves in a moment of economic reckoning in higher education.) He positioned himself not only as a student-consumer but also an investment and an opportunity that the university had chosen to pursue. That Jordan set the scene for his reader reflects the ways he saw himself as not just a student-consumer but also as a student-community-member. Within our activity setting—the university as a whole—Jordan recognized that the issue of scholarships “pertains to me, and a lot of other students here on campus.” Jordan embraced the idea of a collective, that his voice was not only his own: it was a tool he could use on behalf of his fellow students. Throughout the process, he was affirmed in the ways he was positioning himself. A Writing Center consultant told him that the language was “still formal,” yes, “but you’re explaining how this relates to you” as well. The consultant even joked that those personal details and community ethos were the “key”: those humanizing details would help this more “formal” message still show that students are not just numbers or faceless homework “machines.” Far from making Jordan seem like some cog in the wheel, the

framing of the letter also made it seem to the consultant “like you're not just one [student] who has this problem.” He was part of a larger, shared identity.

Jordan's experiences as a student also made this activity a felt experience for him. He was motivated by a sense of justice, that basing academic scholarships solely a student's “high school efforts” was unfair. As he wrote in his rhetorical analysis for me, “if the person had a couple bad years in high school, the amount they receive” would be judged by past mistakes rather than future potential. Jordan used several rhetorical questions throughout his drafting process to build his case for which students ought to be recognized, as here in his analysis:

Why shouldn't people who are loyal, hardworking, and determined be rewarded for their efforts? Doane should give the directed amount they would receive for [each student's] freshman year, but after the second semester raise the scholarship to a bracket related to the higher GPA. This way if the student works hard and [puts] forth more effort in college than high school, that person is rewarded for it.

I notice his use of value-laden language: loyalty and determination, for instance, are defining qualities of a student who earns higher marks in college than in high school.

While I read this language as personal and more vulnerable—considering its absence from the self-described “more formal” letter itself—Jordan may have imagined these moves as more traditional and academic than I'm perceiving them. As he wrote to one group member during the peer response process, “You could also try to get to the heart of people ... like it is a problem that needs attention and if you can make the issue seem to be put into the perspective of the reader then they would more likely give it more attention.” The way he describes emotional appeals, Jordan may have had a more

strategic understanding of the performance of emotion than I'm suggesting. Although he was completing peer response as a graded classroom activity, his engagement on this rhetorical level suggests he's occupying a subject position that transcends his studenthood. Jordan's attention to audience in this comment reveals his understanding of the role of a community in problem-solving as well as the responsibility to earn the audience's attention and involve them more deeply—arguments are not just cognitive.

How a Subject "Sounds"

Jordan wanted to "come off" a certain way on the page. Although his primary goal was something that could benefit almost all students, I believe he then also felt the pressure to represent them well. The traits Jordan invoked in his analysis call to mind Aristotle's articulation of the relationship among character, emotion, and rhetoric: a rhetor's "speech shall be convincing and persuasive, but [they] must give the right impression of [themselves], and get [their] judge into the right state of mind" (Aristotle 91). This can be achieved, Aristotle suggested, by signaling with those "special signs of emotion," the "symptoms familiar to all"—as when a person puts their hands to their face and shakes with sobs (Aristotle 231). I try to teach students to grapple with such appeals in moderation. For instance, students get to play with the extreme versions of these appeals, as we spend one class period exploring logical fallacies in popular media. Students talk in small groups to try to identify and name the problems in the logic of scare-tactics, the slippery slope, and false either/or choices. I see Jordan's attention to tenor as caution: he's wary of logical limits, moments he might "lose" the audience. Instead, he's seeking relevance: "the perspective of the reader," as opposed to the manipulation of the reader, is what he suggests his classmate consider more deeply.

Between Jordan's attention to sound and his deployment of details about our institution's idyllic campus, his choices seem quite strategic: although he is operating squarely from the frame of his experiences as a student, the interdependent identities of community members; his decision-making process is hardly one of rote mechanics.

In a wider sense, Jordan's focus on audience may relate to his preoccupation with the "sound" of his writing and his arguments. In particular, as a student and writer, his comments about tone often coincided with comments about organization or structure. I notice a potential connection: perhaps in Jordan's mind, a "formal-sounding" text is one that is well-organized and cohesive. Although, as I will discuss, writing features such as diction were also important to Jordan, the pairing of sound and structure seemed significant. Many of his peer responses to classmates were focused on organization, as when he reassured a classmate that their "conclusion tied everything up and sounded good so probably [didn't] need ... much work."

The pairing of "sound" and traditionally academic writing concerns like structure doesn't concern me, in terms of Jordan's potential agency. I don't view his moves as a stifling of emotion or limiting his opinions to the trappings of more "formal" writing. Instead, because he's deploying these "classroom" skills toward a public purpose, I see the acrobatics among his subject positions as savvy moves that actually increase his range of movement and sense of agency. As he focused on how the organization made him sound to an audience with more authority than he, Jordan applied "student" strategies to a task that stretched beyond the classroom, but he didn't sacrifice his personal connection to the topic or his personal experiences. As critical pedagogues have discovered, studies in activity theory reveal that when students "choose the motive of the activity, they also

become emotionally engaged in that learning” (Roth and Lee 187). Rather than divorcing his personal-student experiences from his public-student advocating, Jordan’s choices allowed him to bring together skill and awareness from across his student subject positions. Activity theory suggests knowledge is context-dependent and performative—and not “an innate or stable characteristic of individuals” (Roth and Lee 194). I see Jordan’s self-descriptions as strategic expressions, harnessed to direct his energy toward “recovering more humane forms of education,” as Roth and Lee refer to social, solution-oriented activities (188). Further, “deep writing” is necessary for growth, as a subject learns to shift among various levels of depth as they create dynamic activity (Lavelle and Guarino 296).

Jordan positioned himself as one of many community members, which reflects a sense of an integrated, social student identity: his experiences matter and are worthy of attention, but so are the considerations of keeping the entire community operating smoothly. “Achieving common goals requires professionals to cross organizational boundaries and combine the resources, norms, and values from their respective settings into new, hybrid solutions,” writes Anagnostopoulos (139): Jordan’s language to the administration suggests a spirit of compromise. His offer to “propose a change” indicates a willingness to acknowledge existing conditions but contribute a future alternative. Because his sense of self was embedded in a social framework, Jordan was able to embrace the project as “instructional practice which follows the learners into their life activities outside the classroom”: Engeström argues that this is a necessary invitation teachers must extend and students must take up to form a “true productive learning activity” (Engeström “Zone” 39).

To put it another way, students don't learn to the same depth when they see themselves as operating only in a classroom setting: their identities as classroom students is finite and temporary. Ask any university advancement office, but I argue that students' wider identities as students within a campus community have more influence over the depth of their experiences. Alumni of small, private institutions like Doane often report that it was their relationships with their professors (not the classes) or the groups and activities (not the classes) that allowed them to engage and reach their potential on campus. Teachers, instead, can model engagement and connection through their invitations to let student "voices be heard" across activity settings (Herrington and Curtis 361). Through these affirming practices, Herrington and Curtis argue, teachers foster students who come to bridge the gaps among their private and public identities (375). Far from being a strictly economic argument, Jordan's project challenges the nature of student-institution relationships, as the "relationship of individual subjects with others in their community," Roth and Lee write, is always "one of *exchange*" (199, emphasis in original).

Shifting Subjectivity

The seemingly harmonious movement among subject identities, however, does not mean that Jordan's process was all smooth or linear. In fact, the points of tension he faced throughout the composition process may have been what nudged him to see himself more as a member of a collective—a community that would outlast the project, the class, and him. He reflected in his rhetorical analysis about his early research into the topic:

[In] deciding who to send [the letter] to, I first thought about the financial aid office. I went and spoke to them, and they told me they have nothing to [do] with

academic scholarships. They also told me that once the scholarship is given out, they [cannot] change it. This information deterred me for a second, because it meant even if I got the attention of someone higher up, nothing would change for me.

Jordan now had to follow up with the vice president who oversaw the admissions office: Financial Aid let him know that it was this administrator responsible for the processes Jordan was interested in changing. After a visit to that area of campus, he seemed to shift the meaning of the topic from a personal one to a community one: “I got over this [setback] though with the idea that even if nothing changes for me, it might change for future students.” His behavior, that he was willing to go meet with “authorities” across campus, suggests his sense of power: those support offices are indeed there to support *him*. Jordan recognized what was possible and what was not, weighing the particular outcomes and deciding consciously how to proceed. In Chapter 3, I discussed Aaron’s process of decision-making, which was also very pragmatic—but in a much more passive manner. Here, Jordan consolidates his resolve, finding momentum redirected for this new reality. Aaron more so bowed to each new reality he discovered in the process: he made his choices based on which resources were available to speak with him as he sought them out and which paths required the least crossing of red tape.

Jordan’s other social interactions throughout the process also influenced his process. In fact, as I learned in reviewing the data, it had been a Writing Center consultant who first suggested Jordan expand his point of view in the letter. When Jordan asked about whether his text was sounding formal enough, the consultant affirmed that it was formal even in the part where he was describing his own position, but they wondered

about taking that position even more broad: “You talk about yourself and how it relates you, but you could bring in [how] this is true for other students as well.” Jordan’s positionality in the problem was “continuously produced and reproduced in practical activity” (Roth and Lee 215). Activity theorists suggest that “who we are with respect to others” is “constituted with and by the social and material resources at hand” (Roth and Lee 216).

These interactions across the community also helped Jordan expand his toolbox. As he explained, Admissions was “the one who puts together a brochure [with the] diagram for the academic scholarships given to incoming freshmen.” During his consultation in the Writing Center, Jordan talked about his plans for this material: he was “going to ... try to quote this [line] off their mission for academic scholarships.” The consultant was enthusiastic about the idea of quoting the brochure back at them: “Sweet!” they said. Jordan asked to confirm whether it was going “to be a good idea to quote” it: “Yeah,” the consultant explained, “I think that I’d be really unhappy when they say ‘so we reward students generously’” but it’s not “true for returning students ... [even] if they really excel here at Doane.” Jordan took this plan and the reassurance back to his draft. The final Public Text included the move like so:

In the brochure given to incoming freshmen it states, “We reward students generously for what they’ve achieved in the classroom, making Doane’s world-class education even more affordable[.]” Why should this statement be any different for students already here?

He used the integration skills we’d been practicing all semester; he even employed a rhetorical question to add his own voice and plea to address what he considered a gap in

the school's argument. In his analysis, he reflected on how useful this visit and the brochure had been to him: "I added [that line] to the end of my letter ... This was very helpful to me, basically stating exactly what I was trying to get across." Again, this only continues to support how Jordan indicated that he saw himself as a participant in an active dialogue, even as he employed "academic" skills of evidence collecting, direct quoting, and structuring. These tools helped him cross subject positions: "A tool always implies more possible uses than the original operations that have given birth to it" (Engeström "Zone" 27).

As compositionists, I believe we need to be able to consider whole systems of activity, not just bridging "personal" and "public" identities, but locating the ways that even multiple student identities are shaped and performed. This level of awareness is something that students and faculty are aware of in common sense ways—of course faculty senates and student councils are a good idea, as they give us the space to focus on particular parts of our work more intently. All activities, at their heart, are collective pursuits to solve problems using tools. Rhetorical activity, then, should be conceptualized in ways that capture both conversation-level goals—what does this student want to do with this text?—and the goals of the collective. Even a seemingly finite "problem" such as completing a classroom assignment occurs within the context of larger, ongoing, often long-term conflicts (Russell 508). Without those forces, the current issue at hand in the project couldn't exist: without those forces, the topic of the student's project would have to be falsified or otherwise manufactured, dampening the potential power and meaning for the student's learning.

Agency, for a student like Jordan, may have to do with his use of tools across “boundaries” of student subject positions, time, and shared problems. While some scholars have considered agency a nebulous or slippery concept, Geisler suggests that there is no problem with conceptualizing agency as a trait or force one possesses—so long as teachers agree that everyone begins with *some* agency already or a latent potential to identify that room to move and exercise it. As Jordan shaped and used his feelings of frustration as a student in a tough financial situation, perhaps so too can agency be considered a tool for activity. Agency may lie in helping students identify “unacknowledged resources—body, space, and so on” that “allow for the exercise of agency in ways” that are new (Geisler 15).

Russell describes an activity as “any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction” (510). This rich definition reflects the complexity of Jordan’s subject position: he was at once a writer in an English 101 course, a recipient of academic and sports scholarships, a consumer paying for various parts of his education out-of-pocket, a student-athlete bound to certain performance expectations, and a resident of the campus. Many writers, students, student-athletes, and residents preceded him on this campus; many more will follow, I imagine. His individual experiences, though unique and his own, share realities with these others’ experiences. When I expand the definition of a rhetorical act beyond a single task or utterance (“complete the assignment” or even “send the letter”) and context (“... for your teacher” or “... to your public audience”), I make space for the web of activity that provides context and meaning for students’ rhetorical, historical, and social experiences.

Object as a Network of Interwoven Goals

To consider this expansive framework more deeply, I turn to another point of the activity triangle—object, or the goal toward which the subject moves. As should be clear, Jordan identified a meaningful goal: to try to change the practices surrounding academic merit scholarships. “It is getting harder and harder to find the funds to keep coming back,” he wrote in his letter. To encourage personal meaning-making, the teacher can work to motivate students “so that they are inclined to want to do well on the project for their *own benefit* or for some *real purpose*” (Eodice, Geller, and Lerner xi, emphasis added). The meaningfulness of the topic and the project was addressed as I moved through Jordan’s subject identities, but here I use the object of the activity as a way into more of Jordan’s decision-making process: *how* did he make, reject, or navigate choices that would help him achieve his rhetorical goals? Russell defines the object of activity as “the overall direction” of it (511). Even as Jordan navigated bumps in his research process, the project maintained a consistent trajectory even as the scope, audience, and format of his argument were “contested” throughout the process (Russell 511). At key (graded) moments in the composition process, Jordan was able to negotiate new understandings of his goal, both as a classroom activity and as a public activity.

As a classroom activity, Jordan’s project began with plenty of typical concerns about assignment criteria. “I don’t have very much because I wanted to write a letter but like an email,” he told me almost right away in our individual consultation. “Yeah, that’s like my question ... how long do you think it should be? Because I mean... I just kind of stopped here. It’s one page and I really don’t have very much information at all.” He showed me what he’d written so far on his laptop screen. Before I responded to the content in the draft, I tried to affirm his concern:

Yeah, that is a good question because depending on ... the medium you're in [the length] might change ... what's conventional, right? Okay, so my obnoxious English teacher answer would be, "It should be as long as it needs to be to get your point across," especially for an "ask" or like pointing out a problem to somebody who has power. One thing that I think is a good strategy is keeping it as concise and direct as possible.

With this comment, he then realized that some of the content he did have might not even apply: he had taken some of the space in this draft to start to compare Doane's practices to other schools', but Jordan started reconsidering the value of this move. Gauging that the time and attention-span of an administrator would be precious, he chose to keep the focus of his content as narrow as possible. Further, in reflection, it seems clear that Jordan's sense of fairness was coming from within: although the audience might need to consider what other schools "do," Jordan's main goal was to challenge *Doane's* practices, for what they seemed to suggest.

Beyond the length of the content, Jordan's concerns about the Public Text as an assignment intersected with the demands on the text as public activity. Jordan's sense of himself as a student shaped his preferences for navigating the assignment, but he still had to be resourceful in pursuit of his goal. For instance, I don't offer models, to avoid stifling the range of possible responses. Jordan jumped online to find himself a model instead. While some students need more explicit guidance from me—which I encourage them to seek—I appreciate that Jordan recognized a way forward on his own. It also suggests that he had (or found in the model) a vision. He told me the "format" he was "going off of" was from an example business letter he'd found through Google Images.

He defended this choice by explaining that he imagined this text as a “letter” even though he intended to email it for the sake of ease, efficiency, and documentation.

What he explained next about his process surprised me: Jordan said that he imagined his text would be “like a letter you send us.” Here, he meant that the emails I sent to the class—often also posted as announcements to our learning management system, Blackboard—which reminded him more of a “letter” than an “email.” I couldn’t deny the distinction. My syllabus even coaches students in how I’d like to be addressed in email: I ask them to always include a greeting, complete sentences, and some sort of signature or closing line, though I half-joke that I prefer these moves only because “[i]mpersonal or pushy emails make me sad.” As became clear with the other students observed as well, students’ decision-making is shaped by their “ongoing interaction with another person(s),” including the teacher, including interactions beyond the assignment at hand (Russell 511). In this instance, I was also learning that even my tangential materials, like emails, were factoring into students’ choices.

Indeed, tools include any “material objects in use ... to accomplish some action with some outcome” (Russell 511). As discussed, Jordan’s use of the university’s own brochure—paired with a concluding rhetorical question—helped him leverage the resources he discovered along his path. He used the direct quote from the brochure as a mirror for the institution and the question as an invitation to reflect. In pursuit of his goals, Jordan appropriated a classroom skill of integration. Academic genres of writing may be routine, but when they are used toward social goals beyond the classroom, they become “a path cut through the woods to make the next trip easier” (Russell 515).

Even given this easier “path,” Jordan still had to navigate through some less clear moments along the way. For instance, his Writing Center consultation illuminated some of Jordan’s assumptions and undefined goals. As is common in our center, the consultant asked him what his goals were for the session and with the project. Jordan named structure as a big concern, not surprisingly. “It is coming along,” he said: “needs work but the format of what I want to do is there hopefully.” The two read through the draft together, then Jordan pointed the consultant’s attention to the final paragraph: “I don’t see any problems with the structure of this last paragraph,” the consultant responded, but “one thing I would say is like bring something to wrap it all up. Okay, so maybe that’s maybe that’s when you do this, yeah, [add the brochure] quote. ... Does that make sense? And then that’s your conclusion and then you end with ‘thank you for your time.’”

Jordan faltered here. “I don’t know if I’d say... I don’t know if I’d put ‘thank you for your time’ in there.” Although he’d talked about “sounding formal” and his concerns about how the audience would perceive him, now that the two were wading into word choice, Jordan’s concept of “formal” came to light. Jordan suggested he might “just end it ‘sincerely.’” The consultant left the choice to him: “Okay, and I’ll leave that up to you. You can do that when you do the final [draft].” He went with his instinct: Jordan did end the email with “sincerely,” followed by his full name. The session, however, help Jordan become more conscious about of how he employed emotion and tried to evoke a response from his reader. The consultant reflected that the draft was “questioning how the system works” without explicitly saying “‘you’re not raising scholarships’”: in fact, the consultant suggested Jordan deflect responsibility away from the reader and reframe the system as a broader, less personal force. “Change this to ‘the policy regarding,’” they

suggested on a line that had been talking directly about the amount of scholarship money. Jordan was on board with the tweak: “Totally. Okay.”

The language of his argument slowly shifted to more strategically seek his goal and persuade the reader to support his perspective. Jordan couldn’t have done this without harnessing the power of his position as he built his argument: he was an individual operating in a network of webs of activity. Jordan introduced himself in the letter as follows:

[I’m] a student with a strenuous engineering major. This major takes an enormous amount of time to study and perfect. I am also on the golf team, where we practice every single day for hours. Despite the numerous activities I am in, and all of the separate issues I am involved with, I have kept my GPA above a 3.0. I am proud of this because in high school I was not a great student, and only kept my grades up to about a 2.7.

I see Jordan laboring here to build a concrete picture of his experiences for the administrator reading his letter. His language in this letter seems to contrast with the language he uses to build the same case for me as a reader in the Rhetorical Analysis. In his analysis, he describes the “proud” accomplishments in even more charged language than he did in his letter: he suggests that a student handling a schedule like his and earning then maintaining a higher GPA shows institutional “loyalty” from a “hard-working, determined” student body. While the letter to his public audience is more evidenced-based, focusing on the student *behaviors* worthy of recognition, his analysis seems to indicate his understanding of what the institution does value. I believe Jordan’s use of these two different registers shows how he navigated along the line between

evoking empathy and “guilting” the audience in feeling complicit. If he’d included the value-laden description of a “loyal” student in his letter, the administrator reading it might have rejected it outright, thinking an ignorant new student was trying to tell them (a veteran staff member) what the institution believes in.

Instead, by the end of the process, it was clear that Jordan saw his classroom goals and public goals as related—coordinated, even. He was concerned about both filling out the shape of the assignment as I expected it, “while giving a voice to people needing similar help.” As he narrated his process in the Rhetorical Analysis, “With the project guidelines being to choose a topic that creates a positive change relating to an audience of people outside the classroom, I decide to focus on the University as a whole.” He saw the ways that he occupied multiple positions and moved himself toward interconnected goals—and he was able to articulate that level of awareness to me and to his peers along the way. His meta-processing, as when he references and later quotes the assignment sheet back to me, reveals an agile movement among activities and tools.

A Voice for Change

As Jordan wrote in his rhetorical analysis, “I do not know if my topic brought any change, or was heard, however I still feel accomplished with the knowledge that I tried to make a change.” His fixation on how he “sounded” was intimately connected with his sense of himself as an agent: by the time he wrote this analysis, he was seeing his “formal” language and the “letter” format as a means to an end. He wanted to be better “heard” by the audience, even as he had to clarify for himself what that would mean in his rhetorical choices. He navigated those choices among multiple subject positions: he operated as a student in a class and as a student within a community.

The purpose of his project forced him to reconcile the extent to which the goal was for his own personal benefit: Jordan came to value his project for the gratification that he might be supporting future versions of himself. He was also responding to a social problem from the position of a student-athlete and a scholarship-earner. While scholarships are mainly used as a recruiting strategy that attract and target students for particular types of past behaviors, Jordan saw them as a potential tool to direct and reward students' performances across their years on campus. Through activity theory, I can see the ways that Jordan embodied, wrote in, and spoke from a place of "multi-voicedness": as webs of activity intersect and necessarily influence each other, the vocalicity of the subjects becomes "multiplied in networks of interacting activity systems. [Multi-voicedness] is a source of trouble and a source of innovation, demanding actions of translation and negotiation" (Engeström "Expansive" 136). Was Jordan behaving in his own interest or others'? Was he performing for me or performing for his audience?

How much do any of these intentions matter? These are blurry lines anyway. My teaching experiences show that if students can be given some structure and be pointed toward relevant resources, they can find what they need to practice rhetorical agency. Perhaps the teacher's role is to help students see that classroom writing "for the teacher" can at the same time reach and impact other audiences; not only are classroom and public writing not mutually exclusive, they may be inherently complementary. (And neither seems to be wholly liberatory or constraining.) Jordan transformed the "academic" skills of evidence-collection and argument-building for use in the "everyday" genre of email: academic skills ought not be means to the end of a degree, and they can be leveraged to help students embrace more agentic positionalities than simply "student." In his

sweeping study of more than 2,000 writing assignments from 400 courses at 100 institutions, Dan Melzer's findings suggest that "[i]nstructors who assign only writing to the teacher—and especially writing to inform the teacher-as-examiner—neglect to provide students with the kind of meaningful rhetorical purposes and social context found in assignments aimed at wider audiences" (137). The writing in those classroom-only activities became rote, repetitive, and impersonal, seemingly to students' detriment. Teachers might do well, however, to open to the possibility that teacher-as-examiner may be a position we can't shake, but we can add positions that help communicate to students that we value their work beyond our assessment for course credit. Teachers might add other conceptions to their identities, like teacher-as-host (inviting students to meet others as they enter a wider community) or teacher-as-bridge (inviting students to cross what may have felt like boundary into another type of activity).

Jordan modeled this sort of shift. He seemed very comfortable in his roles both as a *student* in the classroom completing an assignment and as a *student-writer*, advocating for change among a community of his peers and not only writing "for" the teacher. He also seemed to experience satisfaction and agency throughout the process, as he identified a personal frustration and actively directed it into rhetorical choices in response. Action then fed and influenced his sense of purpose, audience, and scope. Although skeptical readers might take issue with some of Jordan's affective choices among the parts of the Advocacy Project, suggesting they indicate a limited or disingenuous performance, to me they suggest an awareness necessary for agency. I quote Roth and Lee at length to explore the role of emotions in activity-oriented rhetorical education:

Increasing one's possibilities in the world and control over one's life conditions—learning in the broad sense—are associated with positive emotional valence. The subject receives successes and failures with respect to the chosen motive positively or negatively, but the possibility of success shapes the way in which the subject engages in activity. On the other hand, current emotional states constitute a context for the selection of meaningful actions and the operations that realize them, but actions also feed back and mediate emotional states. Educational researchers may come to appreciate that emotions are always tied to the motives and goals of learning. (215)

Agency will *always* involve emotion: activity is a human endeavor. Instead of debating the issue, Roth and Lee suggest educators instead begin from a far more important question: “How do emotions mediate the selection of goals and actions?” (Roth and Lee 215)

Each of the three students in this study faced frustrations, hurdles, and tensions as they navigated their choices. Jordan's subjectivities in particular call my attention to the issue of distance: How did each student navigate their relationship to their topic? How close were they to the problem? Were their views aligned with the audience? Were they present or visible in the message itself? Distance—to the topic, problem, and audience—may be one way of accounting for the differences in students' choices and their feelings about those choices. For instance, Jordan perceived his engineering major as a rigorous one; this major is one of the smaller, newer, and more competitive and challenging programs on campus. These graduates are also expected to earn more across their lifetimes than students in other programs. Aaron, on the other hand, had declared a

business major: one of the biggest programs on campus, whose graduates pursue a wider variety of eventual jobs and careers. While the esteem and prospects of Jordan's chosen path may have made him more complacent about the growing burden of financing his education, perhaps these details made him more aware of the economic picture. This may have given him more of a connection to his topic than Aaron felt with his, despite his expressed desire to help the world through diverting more waste to recycling. Jordan saw himself as more complicit in the problem he wanted to address; he owned this connection, and perhaps this accounts for the more strategic and self-aware choices that resulted throughout his process, as compared to Aaron's.

Indeed, Jordan's process of navigation suggests that when "inner contradictions are conscious, they become the primary driving forces that bring about change and development within and between activity systems" (Roth and Lee 203). And yet, I wonder how much Jordan's skills and predispositions affected his ability to navigate the process. While some students in his class might have abandoned their goals as the scope and potential impact became clearer to them, Jordan continued on with the "determination" he suggested the school should reward. What does his empathy and ability to share his goal say about the success of his project—and, more broadly, the potential change an English 101 project can have on a community, even into the future? As a composition teacher, I feel called to reconsider my own definitions of impact and success, given these students' journeys and my own process of reflection. Cheryl Geisler notes that agency is not about who can be said to have it and who can't: instead, studies of agency must make space for "the varieties of agency and of the available means for achieving a hearing" (Geisler 10). Jordan's project highlights the ways that students'

rhetorical agency may be less about the positions we all inherit in this system—and more about how we navigate our activities together.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS:

“IS THIS WHAT I WANTED?”

I opened this investigation by sharing what used to be an awful teaching moment for me, when students would reach the end of the Advocacy Project and casually ask, “Is this what you wanted?” I have instead embraced this moment as a way into an exploration of expectations and agency, with decision-making as the behavioral unit of interest. After analyzing the composition process of three students in turn, I can return to where I began and ask myself whether this study is what I wanted. I offer my conclusions and implications as potential answers to the research questions articulated throughout this dissertation.

What is the relationship between expectations and rhetorical agency?

I posed my overarching research question in terms of students’ decision-making processes, given the implicit, explicit, and perceived expectations at play. One discovery I’ve made is that this question overemphasizes the role of the teacher’s expectations. I was not always able to discern evidence of a direct relationship between my expectations, anyone else’s expectations, and students’ sense of agency. I might not have believed it at the outset of this project, but what mattered much more was the relationship between the nature of the choices themselves and rhetorical agency. Students *must* make choices to complete composition assignments: choices are inherent to composition. What agency students experience in the making of those choices is another question.

This shift in thinking was productive. Letting go of assumptions about my ability to “cause” or “unlock” agency in my students helped me gain some distance throughout

the analysis. In fact, one of the biggest implications of this study is that too much focus on expectations overestimates the teacher's role. Teachers might do well to give as much energy to staying present with students throughout the process as they do to the articulation of assignment expectations: an assignment sheet might be best thought of as a starting point and a statement of terms, while the social process might be the best site to leverage a teacher's influence. Further, there is much to be gained in centering students' studenthood as we begin rhetorical activity together: it's the preeminent marker in our relationship. Facing this reality together is as fine a beginning as any for a composition class. Once I accepted that "school" was already the primary activity happening in the assignment, I was able to avoid the knee-jerk reaction that the Advocacy Project was too much "about me" or my particular class. Indeed, using activity theory nurtured an appreciation for the whole ecology of an assignment, from how a Writing Center conversation spurs a final revision that would otherwise seem out-of-the-blue to how the range and variety of a student's expressions become more evident across peer responses, author's notes, faculty feedback, and drafts.

An ecological view of how activity happens helped me gain a deeper sense of how students perceive themselves, their choices, and their agency. While individual assignments such as the Advocacy Project are often viewed as strategic endeavors—somewhere between carpentry and chess, to mash metaphors I've mentioned—the social lens used here helps me consider that composition is neither a product that the student and I build together as full partners nor a game where we volley responses back and forth. Instead, the two of us are situated in a web of networked activity, where many forces influence the choices we make. Our influence on each other also waxes and wanes

across the process. The study taught me the value of such a holistic approach to writing pedagogy: while assignment construction does matter, there may be far more potential for student agency in assignment navigation. To explore, I can return to my questions, which suggest quite a bit more about me than they do about my students.

How do students' perceptions of my expectations seem to affect their rhetorical decision-making?

I addressed my unconscious assumption that expectations are necessarily related to students' choices, but in particular, this question challenges me to consider the limits of my expectations. Even when I believed I was being explicit and straightforward, students like Aaron read between lines that weren't there: students' perceptions seemed to fixate on *what* choices they should or should not make or how to execute those choices, given the rules, limits, and student histories at play. In this way, I could say, their perceptions of my expectations did impact their decision-making in the rhetorical process, but the type of impact seemed to be determined by their perception of my position. What did they believe was my role or obligation to them, and what did they believe was their role or obligation to me?

Of the three students, Aaron arguably exercised the least agency, as so many of his choices were made by default. Strategizing toward his goal or for his audience mattered less than managing the path of least resistance with the authorities involved in the process. What I take from processes like Aaron's is that my particular expectations and how I express them matter less than how students view my role in their process. Aaron's close reading of the assignment sheet revealed that he saw the instructions as a trick, full of linguistic traps to be avoided in order to "get the A." In the grading criteria

(fig. 4), however, the qualities to earn an A focus on the “individual” rhetor and their “personally relevant” topic, “tailoring” the message to the audience, accurate and useful evidence, coherent organization, and consistent and fitting attribution.

	<i>Exceeding (A)</i>
Rhetorical Agency	Demonstrates ability to identify and respond to a specific, personally relevant problem or issue; response is impactful, direct, and fits the scope of this opportunity for the individual rhetor
Audience Awareness	Demonstrates an exceptional understanding of audience and purpose by focusing and tailoring all elements of the work effectively
Evidence	Relevant, credible evidence is gathered, reported, and interpreted clearly, fairly, and accurately; in addition, student utilizes or synthesizes evidence in a novel and or especially effective way
Structure and Organization	Demonstrates a sophisticated organization to achieve maximum coherence and momentum
Attribution	Attributes sources consistently and completely, uses appropriate citations within and or at the end of the work, and consistently utilizes relevant elements of style

Fig. 4: Grading Criteria. The grading criteria expressed in the Public Text rubric focus on the product and how it was shaped, not on the types of choices made but on their rationale and execution.

Given Aaron’s interpretations, I don’t want to give too much space here parsing the language of the assignment sheet or the syllabus but instead want to draw attention to who Aaron thought was speaking through those documents: teacher-as-trickster, whose graded assignments were not only a test of skill but whose instructions were a test in themselves. Jordan, however, positioned himself as a student with strengths, skills, a meaningful story or experience, and a voice in the community: I take from Jordan’s moves that he saw me as a guide, if a judgmental one. Lavelle and Guarino insist that

writing instructors should “design writing environments that encourage a deep approach by specifying meaningful writing as an expectation, and include rubrics based on deep criteria”: they champion reflective revision and “integrated” performances (Lavelle and Guarino 303). “Reflective revision,” they explain, “implies an agentic position, seeing oneself as a maker of meaning” (302). Do students think they’re calling their own shots as we travel the project together? How could my assessment materials better credit the qualities of an integrated process over those of a seemingly-strategic product?

Aaron’s project may have been more “impactful” than Jordan’s: the chalk message may have influenced his fellow residents to make the journey to the blue recycling bin, while Jordan’s email may have been only skimmed if not trashed outright. Throughout the class, I define rhetorical purpose for the students as “the change you seek to make in the intended audience”: that outcome or goal becomes the object of the message. Further, I help students think about how to imagine change through rhetoric: “Do you want this message to change people’s minds or change people’s actions?” Impact, then, means the potential change in that intended audience. Is the imagined change specific (within scope), real (doable, within reach for this rhetor), and meaningful (addresses the problem)? Aaron’s object was to prompt an immediate, small change that would contribute to a vast and crucial outcome—improving the world’s wellness. By contrast, Jordan’s text achieving its intended outcome was, I’m surprised to realize, more of a long shot. Sarah’s goal was also a gamble, not because of its odds but because of its ambiguity: how would the group know if/when the Twitter page caused an impact? What would that impact look or feel like?

The products of each project may have suggested varying levels of impact in the world, but in developmental terms, it seems clear Jordan's *process* was more impactful than Aaron's. From what he wrote throughout the process, Jordan did not see me in an adversarial way as Aaron did. He never disregarded my instructions or expectations but instead incorporated them into his process. As Thaiss and Zawacki describe, students become savvy, conscious writers as their framework for expectations deepens: students are developing most once they come to see that "expectations exist with various, complex structures but may also include directions that teachers and students will create together" (139–149). Because students are expected to choose personally meaningful topics, objects, genres, and audiences, I had assumed that the Advocacy Project would catapult many students into this realm of thinking. "The relationship between action (goal) and activity (motive)," however, "is dialectical, for actions constitute activities, but activities motivate particular action sequences" (Roth and Lee 201). I need to remember that learning requires "movement" across levels, from "actions to activity" (Engeström "Zone" 33).

In practice, the activity of composition is messier but also potentially more fruitful than I was imagining. Development requires novel experiences, as all three students pursued: the forms of response and tools employed, however, must be consciously crafted and applied for the subject to take meaning from the attempt. Teachers also can't know what this process will feel like until we arrive there together: subjects "must learn new forms of activity which are not yet there. They are literally learned as they are being created. There is no competent teacher" (Engeström 138). In

this way, the teacher's relation to the topic or the genre also matters much less than the student's perceived relationship to the teacher.

How do students characterize their rhetorical agency in this writing project? How do students feel rhetorical agency (as a phenomenon distinct from and more complex than rhetorical decision-making)?

While the meaning of “impact” remains complicated, another way to think about students' rhetorical agency is to come at the concept of “personal.” Much literature is dedicated to the assumptions and dangers of “personal” writing in the composition classroom, but through an activity theory lens, I see “personal” in terms of the subject's proximity to their topic as well as their audience. In the assignment sheet and rubric, I state that students must choose a personally “relevant” topic that they believe they can advocate for in the world. In the future, I may need to give more attention to “relevant” in terms of distance: if you didn't respond to this issue, I might ask students, how would you benefit, what would you lose, and how would your life remain unchanged? While it's difficult to measure or weigh the stakes of each project for each student, I could prompt more reflection on the issue of personal impact. Where are you located within this topic? Further, a rhetor may apply a new tool and take action in response to this project, but true activity must be “integrated into the life activities of the learner”—the actions must be “socialized” or “generalized” (Engeström “Zone” 32). Aaron's one-shot take on the project and his career as an environmentalist do not fit these criteria. His position in the community and the role of this action in his life matter but were never confronted.

Just as I've imagined students' work as operating within webs of activity, so too do I see potential for considering how audience, message, and the subject are connected.

Do students see themselves as most closely aligned with the audience or the message?

For instance, Sarah did not articulate that she was present in either: she necessarily already knew of the campus group, so she was not in the public audience who needed to be made aware of the group's existence. She also didn't see herself as aligned with the message, as she stated that she was not part of the campus group nor part of the LGBTQIA community, though based on her familial experiences, she instead saw herself as more of an ally or as aligned with folks from marginalized groups. Aaron never directly addressed his own relationship to the message or to the audience; he reported seeing other students throw their recycling away but never discussed his own recycling habits, and nothing about his own identity was even implied anywhere in the message. Jordan, however, was present throughout. He was personally affected by and complicit in the problem, saw himself as a community member in dialogue with the audience, and expressed an expansive objective: the impact may not be immediate or improve his lot, but it could change things for future community members.

As is becoming clearer in my language, proximity seems related to presence: how did the students "own" their proximity? Where were their voices, faces, and relationships marked? I wonder, too, what it would mean to ask students to address these questions of relevance. While I discovered that Sarah was sure of herself as a student-writer, that sense of clarity and directness didn't emerge in the same way within the project, where she was composing, anonymously, on behalf of a group to which she didn't belong. Jordan was the most "present" in his project. From my perspective as an observer, I notice that the versions of himself expressed in his email, in his Rhetorical Analysis, and even in the Writing Center were closer in proximity to each other than the various

subjectivities engaged in other students' processes. Jordan's subject positions were very similar to each other, and he worked from an integrated understanding of them.

It's difficult, however, to measure the role of presence, wholeness, cohesion, or integration with much more precision than this. Between these students, Jordan's process warranted his identity and story being part of the message. Sarah was understandably more cautious. Not only was there more to risk in making anyone the "face" of the group in an online setting, but also Sarah herself didn't think her level of membership was fitting for her to serve as a representative of the group. This isn't a praise of risk, either. While Jordan's name was attached to his message, he had little to lose: nothing he said jeopardized his current situation, so the status quo was about the worst case scenario possible. In fact, being present but somewhat "selfless" (in defense of future students) may have contributed to his ethos, from the audience's vantage point. Like Sarah, however, he was imagining others as the primary beneficiaries of his rhetorical action; future students might witness the change in their time at Doane. Perhaps rather than face, voice, or identity, personal proximity and the perceived timeline of the impact are more so related to agency. To contrast with Jordan's sense of time, Aaron saw himself as an actor, but his agency was limited: he seemed to perceive this attempt as a single shot at change. He was "part" of something bigger but through a temporary and isolated performance. Aaron also failed to leverage his position as a fellow student. I'm not making an argument for impact; I'm not suggesting that his message would've been more effective if he'd been more visible as the author of his message. Instead, I'm making note of the way his knowledge of or relationship to his peers went unacknowledged throughout his process. He was responding to his peers' actions but not their imagined

logic: *why* were other residents using the dumpster for recyclables when the appropriate bin was feet away? Why did some students—presumably, Aaron included—recycle while others didn't seem to think about it? And why did Aaron care?

Students' experience of risk as part of decision-making is difficult to measure. How would I be able to tell how much of a student's self they shared or performed in a project? Studies in the field of composition surrounding authenticity and voice have suggested the dangers of such attempts. Instead, however, I can get a sense of *which* selves students invited into their projects. If, as Cooper insists, agency is "based in individuals' lived knowledge that their actions are their own," I must consider *which* "they" is in action in a given moment (421). An activity, Engeström writes, is a situation "in which no single party has a permanent dominating position and in which no party can evade taking responsibility over the entire care trajectory" ("Expansive" 150). Activity theory challenges me to consider the ways in which not only are students and I subjects working together toward goals, but students themselves are also shaping and adopting new identities throughout the process. Not only is the Advocacy Project less "about me" than I thought but also it's less about a single student self than I originally assumed.

And yet, activity does not happen without all of us, and expansive learning happens at the meeting of multiple, coordinating activities. Put reductively, students develop as agents when opportunities to create meaning cross perceived boundaries, when "academic skills" are made applicable outside the classroom and everyday texts are given use inside the classroom. Thus, meaningful growth is made possible through the interaction of all subjects involved in each web, from the teacher and student to the Community Advisor in the dorm and the Financial Aid Office. Engeström explains that

individual agency is still discernible in activity because the series of choices involved requires “different voices [to] take the leading subject position in the activity at different moments. The leading subject role and agency is not fixed, it keeps shifting.”

(“Expansive” 141). “Leading subject” is a way to remember that while activity is a dynamic, social pursuit of a goal, decision-making and action itself is often an individual effort: communities and contexts shape decisions, but often individuals must execute. My work builds upon these understandings by suggesting that students themselves already have the ability to toggle among not only different types of activities but different subjectivities—an idea I can explore more deeply in the following section.

How do other expectations (their own for themselves, those they’ve learned from previous experiences, their peers’, their outside audiences’, etc.) seem to affect their rhetorical decision-making?

Students’ perceptions of what’s expected and whose expectations matter seems to depend most on who they believe they are: one way of understanding this relationship is to consider *which* student self seems to be the “leading subject” making a choice. As each of the projects helped me discover, how students view their available subjectivities is related to the degree to which they perceive themselves as agents. Specifically, I discovered that students who demonstrated more closely related selves acted with more intentionality and produced more targeted rhetoric; these students, such as Jordan, were also more likely to see these selves as connected to each other and to other people across time. Similar to students’ proximity to their problem and their audience, integration and wholeness seem to matter in terms of subjectivity. If students perceive their student identities and their non-student identities as blurry, distant, and without interaction, it’s

more difficult for them to make meaningful choices—even as they might believe or feel that their efforts are more purposeful than I can discern them to be.

Because the role and weight of expectations was relative to the student and their perceptions of self, rather than focusing on which expectations play the greatest role, I find it useful to consider now, instead, how I might take this discovery to help students leverage their social locations and better assess their spheres of influence. Agency's impact on rhetorical choices seems to be a matter of being able to "see" the self acting as if from a distance but to "feel" that all of our selves—the one acting and the one perceiving the acting—are actually quite close together or aligned. In Jordan's process, for instance, he certainly did not perceive a wide gulf between his "student" self and his public "writer" self: in fact, as discussed, he fashioned for himself a powerful "student-writer" self, employing in one text the most relevant skills and identity markers from both the classroom and his other roles.

Similar to metaphors such as "ways to move," "available means," and even a "writer's toolbox," I want to offer another metaphor that could help students bring more awareness and intentionality to their work. To help students discern which selves are available and how they are related, I wonder if a hat metaphor would be helpful. Which hat is a student wearing in a given moment? How many different hats can students find in their wardrobe? How long do they believe they'll keep that hat? Aaron seemed to adopt a hat in this project only temporarily: it was more like a temporary costume because of its similarity to the hat of an environmentalist and was very different from his everyday "student" hat. A visual metaphor such as a hat gives students a concrete way of understanding how closely or distantly aligned their project activity is from the rest of

their activities in life. It may even highlight the complexity of subject positions and social work: some hats may need to stay on at the same time, shoved together; some hats may need altering, may become lost, may fade, may be washed; and so on.

Further, the visual of a hat might help students like Aaron notice when they passively lose or acquire different hats. It makes for an amusing visual, but I imagine Aaron's student hat blowing off his head in the wind in his dorm parking lot as he realizes he must talk to his building's leaders for guidance instead of me, his teacher. I can also see the way his Community Advisor knocks the "poster artist" hat off his head as she offers him a "chalk artist" hat instead: such a metaphor may help students notice but also articulate their perceptions about which hats are available, appropriate, and active or passive—and when. Each hat would give students some space to weigh their choices in light of the most relevant expectations, or each hat would help students notice how willing or able they are to imagine wearing a less familiar hat. As Aaron wanted to launch his message in a communal space, governed more so by his building's leaders than by me, his "resident" hat would mean that those community expectations could outweigh mine as he chose the form and mode of his message. But what would it have looked like for Aaron to have actively fashioned a resident-writer or resident-student hat, the way Jordan had worked from a hybrid, integrated role? One of the reasons Aaron's process seemed more passive and deferent may have been the way each shift in subject position was abrupt, jerky. In "student" mode, he imagined his text as a poster; in conversation with his Community Advisor, he instantly dropped this vision when she offered an alternative.

Gaonkar's theory of agency suggests goals must "originate" with the subject executing the action (263), challenging teachers to invite meaningful choices even as they "assign" the work to students. I invite students to take over my intentions for them, but for this to create an agentic experience, students must actively locate themselves in not only the topic of the project but in the webs of activity implicit in the topic. Students are not just making rhetorical choices: they are crafting rhetorical identities. These two processes must be integrated for agency to be felt, especially considering that students will feel agency differently among varying social locations and identity markers.

Which rhetorical choices do students seem to perceive as expected, naturalized, or otherwise unmarked?

Expected choices fell into familiar categories. All three students, at different points in the process, expressed concerns about the length or size of their Public Text. They seemed to understand a meaningful text as a substantive one, possibly a holdover from experiences with other teachers' requirements (and our previous projects' "ballparks") concerning word or page counts. All students seemed to initially imagine their texts as needing to take on recognizable forms and modes to be credible: they expressed concern that I would either not recognize or not respect the boundaries or fuzzy shapes of "a whole Twitter account" or an "email" rather than a more traditional "letter": Aaron, Carson, and many students also began their brainstorming using common examples of non-essay texts they'd been asked to compose before, such as "a poster" or "a presentation." They didn't discern that when I said "just about anything can be a text" I meant that all texts *could* be equally appropriate in this project, depending on the object of the rhetorical activity.

This last nuance is critical to students' understanding of the available options influenced their actual choices and feelings of agency: it mattered less which choices students initially perceived as expected or appropriate and mattered more whether students were able to thoughtfully weigh and integrate the meaning of the options. Again, choice is overrated in some ways (every activity requires some degree decision-making) and underrated in others (the meaning we ascribe to choices affects our experience of them). These observations are in line with others' work. Thaiss and Zawacki found agency hinged on the substance of available options; "freedom of choice" must go beyond topic (107). While limiting the topics available can foreclose feelings of agency for some students, opening the field doesn't guarantee original or personal meaning-making. However, my work shows the ways that students could benefit from more meta-awareness: opportunities not only to make choices but also to consider which self chooses, with what affordances, toward what implications. Translingual pedagogues Lu and Horner encourage teachers "to recognize difference and agency as in fact the norm for all writing" (592). Agency may become more possible for students when we encourage them to review composition as always-already a process of choosing among differences: which hat, donned at which jaunty angle, and "what kind of difference to attempt, how, and why" (Lu and Horner 592).

My work focuses on the processes of mostly first-year university students; from a developmental perspective, an observer might suggest that a semester-long course is too short a time horizon to foster and train the meta-awareness I'm calling for. The cognitivists in composition, however, give me room for hope. The data from Flower et al. "argued against a deficit model that would point to some missing 'cognitive skills' these

eighteen-year-old freshmen [sic] needed to develop ... To be an effective writer means being able to read a situation, to weigh the costs and benefits of your own options, and to carry out the goals you set for yourself” (*Reading-to-Write* 23). My work challenges others’ assumptions about a student as a singular self that chooses, but as Flower et al. express, I believe students’ incoming cognitive abilities are not a barrier to opening up processes of meta-awareness that ought to accompany students through their education anyway. What if, instead, first-year composition teachers embraced the “one-and-done” nature of so many of these courses and projects? Like free-writing with a timer, how might we use (rather than cope with) the constraint of our limited presence in their developmental journeys? Given the variety of identities and social positions my English 101 students occupy, I could imagine some new space opening up if I were to lean into my teacherness. How could I use my authority and assignment construction to create environments where students have to act as if they believe that there are multiple viable paths ahead of them? Rather than suggesting tension for its own sake, I am owning that conflict is the price of meta-awareness. Students must behave as if “more than one valued option” exists in order to exercise meaningful decision-making (Flower *Construction* 69). Thus, as Flower writes, “Conflict is the price of seeing possibility” (69).

A single course—let alone a single project—is too modest a time horizon and too modest a space for the massive transformations I hope students will experience as rhetors and agents. Instead, my project reminds me to imagine development as a process happening across many opportunities and many locations—crossing and integrating them, in fact. The project also disrupts my sense of process: does rhetorical education necessitate students to think and then compose? In our classroom free-writing practice,

serendipitous ideas and phrases emerge as if from “nowhere,” but they can still be mined, transformed into other work, and stand up to scrutiny. Couldn’t whole, “successful,” grade-earning projects be next used as fodder for following work in meta-awareness? Cooper insists agency is about (first) the recognition of and then (second) the exercise of power, but I am discovering that a developing sense of agency may not be tied to this order of events (421).

I’ve realized that the Rhetorical Analysis as it is prompts students to compose a pseudo-fairytale about a process of conscious decision-making; instead, I can imagine it instead asking them to adopt a position of viewer, coming to the text as a text in the present and trying observe with some equanimity to see what’s there. Currently, students respond to the Rhetorical Analysis prompts too squarely in the position of their past self, explaining their choices as if I’m asking them to justify themselves or lead me to a particular interpretation of the text. Instead, how might different prompts help Aaron, for instance, notice and learn from his accidentally groovy choice of the chalk? In this way, I might also emphasize to students that I do not view this project as a “one-and-done” means to an educational end, but one move in a process of development I believe they will continue beyond my class.

Future research should address methods that help prompt meta-awareness in genuine, cognitive ways: my project suggests promise of potential studies that investigate the impact of increasing the number and variety of such opportunities. Further, I am unsure of the implications of these findings on similar projects conducted in small groups: while I’ve noticed the power of peer interaction in encouraging intentionality and personal relevance, a holistic approach like the one I’ve taken here also reveals that this

type of interaction can be gained by simply varying the points of contact and sites of revision (as having students work without me but with a Writing Center consultant). In all, this project continues to produce challenges and questions for the field's assumptions about choice and agency.

Is this what *I* wanted?

I remain convinced of the importance of choice as a unit of study. Just as self-reported data can be too easily dismissed, I'm aware of some scholars' concerns about student reflections and "voice" being no more than canned performances. Students have to make choices: observing each move from various angles has revealed more than I could have known from a single draft, author's note, conversation, or self-analysis alone. In the end, looking back at my own process, I am struck by the moments of agency I might not have noticed otherwise, those moments of intentional, savvy, integrated action. I am more aware of students' perceptions of risk, face, and potential impact, not only for themselves but also for others. I am happy to abandon the hypervigilant focus I once brought to how I articulated my expectations and instead am eager to "hang out" more in the space of composition, where agents must recognize and negotiate their subjectivity. These realizations strike me as a little obvious now, but having gone through this process, I believe I've had to learn them alongside my students—Sarah, Aaron, Jordan, and their classmates taught me about themselves, our shared activities, and also myself. This is the project I wanted it to be, even if it didn't teach me the lessons I expected. And after all, it's just one project in a journey, just as theirs were.

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